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Career Ahead: Feasibility Study Report

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Youth Futures Foundation is the national What Works Centre for youth employment, with a specific focus on marginalised young people.

We want to see a society where every young person can achieve good work.

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Contents

List of abbreviations

- **NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training):** Refers to individuals, particularly young people, who are not engaged in formal education, employed, or undergoing vocational training.
- **MtL (Making the LEAP):** The social mobility charity that delivered the Career Ahead programme
- **PRU (Pupil Referral Unit):** An educational establishment in the UK designed to provide education for students who are not able to attend mainstream schools.
- **YCL (Youth Career Lead):** The practitioner at MtL responsible for delivering Career Ahead, of which there were four.
- **HoD (Head of Delivery):** The member of staff at MtL responsible for training, coaching and appraising YCLs.
- **HoEP (Head of Educational Partnerships):** The member of staff at MtL responsible for establishing and maintaining relationships with participating schools.
- **EEG (Experts-by-Experience Group):** A group comprising individuals with direct experience relevant to the evaluation focus, aiming to incorporate insights from those with lived experience into the evaluation process.
- **MResO (Mechanism Resource):** The resources offered to a particular stakeholder (e.g. YCLs or young people), such as training and coaching or the support offered by YCLs to young people.
- **MResP (Mechanism Response):** The participants' reasoning and reactions to the resources provided, which drive behavioural changes.
- **C (Context):** The conditions or environment in which the intervention takes place or that shape how different people interact with an intervention, which influence how mechanisms are activated.
- **O (Outcome):** The result or change produced when mechanisms are activated within a specific context

Executive summary

The project

- This study gathered evidence on the feasibility of the Career Ahead programme, an 18-month, targeted, school-based, multi-component intervention. Career Ahead aimed to support year 11s (15 to 16 year olds) at risk of "Not in Education, Employment or Training" (NEET) status to transition into a post-16 placement by facilitating the development of cultural capital and non-cognitive skills, including confidence, motivation, aspiration, resilience, communication, and teamwork.
- Career Ahead comprised four main activities delivered by Youth Career Leads (YCLs): group sessions, mentoring, work experience and follow-on mentoring after year 11.
- Career Ahead was developed by the social mobility charity Making the Leap and delivered for the first time as part of this study with two cohorts of students. Cohort 1 ran from September 2021 to March 2023 and Cohort 2 from September 2022 to March 2024. The evaluation was designed and delivered by Dartington Service Design Lab, a research and design charity.
- 63 students participated during Cohort 1, during which four YCLs delivered the programme in five schools and two Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) across London. The two PRUs withdrew from Career Ahead prior to the start of Cohort 2 due to the incompatibility of the programme in these settings. This was due to the transient student populations, variable attendance, and competing social-emotional interventions, which disrupted delivery and engagement.
- 58 students participated as part of Cohort 2 in the five remaining schools. 51 (88%) were retained at the end of year 11 and 16 (28%) received some form of follow-on mentoring after year 11.
- The aim of this evaluation was to develop and test Career Ahead's programme theory, design improvements to the model and test aspects of evaluation design to inform evaluations of similar interventions. Improvements to the Career Ahead programme were developed through four rounds of refinement, using Dartington Service Design Lab's Rapid-Cycle Design and Testing methodology. During each round, the evaluation team co-designed solutions with Making the Leap staff, focusing on infrastructure, recruitment, session design, mentoring, and organisational improvements.
- Key insights were prioritised through interactive design sprints, ensuring practical changes with the highest potential for impact were implemented for Cohort 2. Recruitment was enhanced by involving YCLs in the selection process, by introducing a 'taster' session to ensure better

alignment between young people and the programme's goals. YCL training was improved, with monthly sessions and additional safeguarding support. Group sessions saw improved coordination with schools to avoid scheduling issues. The programme was also withdrawn from both PRUs due to implementation challenges.

- This study combined theories of change, realist evaluation and contribution analysis to develop and test the programme theory underpinning the Career Ahead model. It did so by answering four research questions (RQs) (table 1). These oriented the evaluation towards testing the programme theory across four areas: implementation, non-cognitive skill development and EET outcomes, as well as unintended consequences. RQs 2 to 4 focused on understanding the causal processes behind changes—how, why, and for whom they occurred—rather than assessing cohort-wide outcomes. These questions aimed to refine the programme theory (in the form of a theory of change) and avoid premature conclusions. In contrast, RQ1 examined implementation at a cohort level, which is why it starts with "To what extent."
- Decisions on which tools to use were based on the most appropriate method for the relevant part of the theory of change. Quantitative data included routinely collected programme data on programme participation, participant socio-demographics, the nine-item Mentoring Functions Questionnaire and the WorkLinks Skills & Values Assessment Tool. Qualitative data included interviews with students, school staff, and Making the Leap staff. Framework analysis was used to analyse qualitative data. Contribution analysis, which helps evaluators to consider the relative contribution of programmes and their components alongside other influences in participants' lives, was used to synthesise the findings. An assessment of triangulation (the degree of convergence between different data) was used to determine the strength of evidence underpinning each element of the causal pathway.

Findings

The findings for each research question are summarised in table 1 below. In table 1 and the rest of the report, 'strong evidence' refers to findings that are consistently supported by multiple sources and demonstrate clear convergence across different data types or research participants, ensuring a high level of confidence in the result. 'Some evidence' indicates findings that are supported by a limited number of sources or research participants and may show partial convergence, suggesting moderate confidence in the result.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	FINDINGS
1. To what extent was Career Ahead successfully implemented, with whom, under what circumstances and why?	• There is strong evidence that the implementation of Career Ahead varied by implementation outcome. YCLs formed strong relationships with participants and offered relevant and helpful advice and support. However, both the group sessions and work experience received mixed feedback from students and YCLs, exposure to the intervention was less than intended, and difficulties recruiting students most likely to benefit persisted. • There is strong evidence that the implementation support provided by the Head of Delivery (HoD), including training and coaching, made an important contribution to the implementation successes observed by supporting the development of YCLs' competencies. So did the improvements to the intervention that were co-designed with YCLs, the HoD and the Head of Educational Partnership (HoEP) prior to Cohort 2, which included improvements to recruitment processes, training and coaching for YCLs, communication with schools and the design of group sessions . • The extent to which this environment enabled implementation was influenced by the strength and quality of school and corporate partnerships and the challenges posed by COVID-19.
2. How did implementation contribute to any reported changes in students' non-cognitive skills, for whom, under what circumstances, and why?	• The change in non-cognitive skills observed through the WorkLinks Skills & Values Assessment Tool showed a slight decrease from pre- to post-intervention, but the difference was small and not statistically significant ($p = 0.16$). The small sample size likely contributed to the lack of statistical significance, and wider confidence intervals indicate uncertainty about the impact of the intervention on non-cognitive skills. Nonetheless, there is strong evidence that Career Ahead made an important contribution to the non-cognitive skills of some students. It did so by facilitating their engagement in development cycles. These were cycles of improvement in which YCLs helped students to identify and pursue goals and overcome obstacles along the way.

	• Whether and how students engaged in these cycles and benefited from Career Ahead depended on wider influences in their lives. This included their personal history, experiences, and capabilities as well as the strength of their support networks outside of Career Ahead. Some students already had sufficient support and did not need Career Ahead. Others with higher levels of need required more support at an earlier stage than Career Ahead could offer. Those who benefited had high-to-moderate levels of need. They engaged with YCLs because they lacked other sources of support.
3. How did students' non-cognitive skills contribute to any reported changes in EET outcomes, for whom, under what circumstances and why?	• There is some evidence of variation in the degree to which students entered positive EET placements following the end of year 11 (i.e. those aligned with their goals). There is some evidence that their levels of non-cognitive skills and, for some, the follow-on mentoring provided by Career Ahead, made an important contribution. • However, follow-on mentoring experienced implementation challenges – it was not delivered at all in two schools – which limited its reach and impact. There is some evidence that non-cognitive skills and follow-on mentoring contributed by empowering students to take advantage of opportunities and protecting them from risks. Some of those with lower levels of non-cognitive skills at the end of year 11 did not get the placement they wanted, while others did not get a placement at all. For these students, follow-on mentoring was insufficient to help them move towards a more positive EET outcome. • Other students were able to enter and maintain a positive EET outcome without the help of follow-on support, due to the strength of their wider networks and their high levels of non-cognitive skills. But for students with sufficient levels of non-cognitive skills who lacked wider support networks, follow-on mentoring helped them to stay on track.
4. How did implementation contribute to any reported unintended consequences, for whom, under what circumstances, and why?	• There is some evidence that the lack of mentor-mentee matching between YCLs, and students contributed to limited engagement in the programme for some students. The YCL-student relationship drove students' engagement in development cycles. Where this relationship was weaker due to misaligned interests and personalities, engagement suffered. • There is some evidence that negative labelling in groups temporarily impacted some students' engagement in Career Ahead. For both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2, the initial lack of clear messaging on why students were selected, and their perceptions of other group members led some students

	to believe that Career Ahead was for poorly behaved students or those with special educational needs. For students that did not associate with these labels, engagement suffered. Over time, through participation and the development of their relationship with their YCL, these impressions dissipated.

Table 1: Summary of overall project findings

Introduction

Background

Despite a decline since its peak in 2012, NEET status (Not in Education, Employment or Training) still affects around 851,000 young people aged 16-24 as of September to December 2023 (ONS, 2024. This has significant implications for quality of life, as wages, salaries, and self-employment income constitute 74% of UK household income and are crucial for retirement savings (DWP, 2023). There is evidence that NEET status has long term 'scarring' effects, given its association with economic inactivity and unemployment throughout the life course (Ralston et al. 2021). The consequences of being NEET go beyond economic concerns and can be serious and long-lasting, including higher chances of depression, unemployment, and poorer health outcomes (Allen, 2014).

Many of the factors that contribute to a higher risk of NEET status among individuals aged 18-25 are most influential at a younger age and during the transition to post-16 placements (i.e. education, employment or training opportunities that support young people's continued participation in formal learning opportunities up to 18 years old). These include school attendance, exclusion, and low academic achievement at GCSE (Crowley, et al., 2023). Under-developed non-cognitive skills (often called 'soft' skills), such as confidence, motivation, and aspiration, and cultural capital (i.e. a knowledge of and familiarity with the norms and expectations of different workplace cultures (Bourdieu, 1984)) are also associated with future NEET status (Mendola and Walker, 2015; Katznelson, 2017; Erdoğan, et al., 2017).

The concept of non-cognitive skills and the degree to which they can be separated from cognition remains contested (Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001). Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that both cognitive and non-cognitive skills are themselves shaped by wider structural factors, including socio-economic status, which also shape NEET status directly (Gladwell et al., 2022). Nonetheless, given non-cognitive skills are the primary focus of both MtL as an organisation and Career Ahead specifically, they were selected as the primary intermediate outcome of this study.

Limited evidence exists regarding effective strategies for enhancing employment outcomes among young people transitioning to post-16 placements, particularly within the English context. Youth Futures Foundation's (YFF) review of the evidence from their Youth Employment Toolkit suggests that while mentoring and coaching may have a modest impact on youth employment, the evidence base varies considerably in delivery contexts and intervention design. YFF have called for more research to develop and test promising interventions to help fill this evidence gap (YFF, 2023).

Career Ahead was one such intervention. Developed by the social mobility charity Making the Leap (MtL) and delivered in 2021 for the first time as part of this study, it was a flexible, multi-component intervention delivered mostly in schools. The programme supported students over 18 months throughout year 11 and their transition into a post-16 setting. Career Ahead comprised mentoring, coaching and other individual and group-based activities delivered by MtL via Youth Career Leads (YCLs), which together were designed to help participants develop non-cognitive skills and cultural capital.

Programme description

The planned timeline for Career Ahead is visualised in figure 1 below.

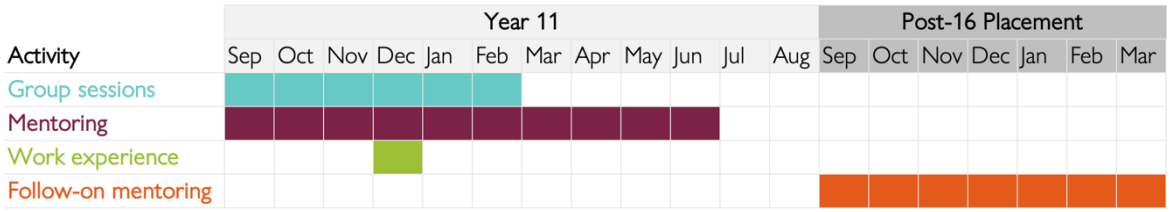

Figure 1: The planned timeline for Career Ahead activities

Career Ahead was delivered across two cohorts by four YCLs as part of this evaluation.

- Cohort 1 (Sep 2021 – Mar 2023): Programme delivered in five secondary schools and two Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) across London in the boroughs of Islington, Waltham Forest, Brent, Southwark and Ilford.
- Cohort 2 (Sep 2022 – Mar 2024): Following challenges with implementation in Cohort 1, the funder (YFF) decided to recommission a second cohort in spring 2022. This decision considered several factors: the reduced impact of the pandemic on programme delivery, the programme's withdrawal from PRUs where significant implementation difficulties had occurred (further details on these challenges are provided in the findings), and the embedding of programme improvement efforts by the evaluator as a key focus during summer 2022, in preparation for Cohort 2. This cohort was delivered in the same five secondary schools as Cohort 1.

Career Ahead was a new intervention. Cohort 1 constituted the first group of young people to have received the intervention in full. The evaluation team facilitated the design of improvements to the delivery model in advance of Cohort 2 based on learning from Cohort 1.

These modifications, alongside other core elements of implementation design and delivery, are summarised in table 2 below. The table is structured using the different components of the TIDieR

framework for intervention description and replication (Hoffman et al., 2014), with references to further information in the rest of the report provided.

TIDieR item	Where located
Brief name: *Career Ahead,* an 18-month targeted school-based intervention designed to support Year 11 students at risk of becoming NEET.	p.11
Why (rationale): the intervention aimed to develop non-cognitive skills and cultural capital, helping students transition into post-16 education or training, addressing NEET risks by supporting confidence, motivation, aspiration, resilience, communication, and teamwork.	pp.10-11
What (materials): Programme materials for YCL practitioners included a manual for the structured group sessions and an itinerary for the work experience opportunities.	pp.13-14
What (procedures): Delivered in schools, the programme included group sessions, one-to-one mentoring, structured work placements, and follow-on mentoring after Year 11.	pp.13-14
Who provided: Career Ahead was delivered by four YCLs trained and supported by MtL. They had experience in youth work and received ongoing coaching and observation.	p.14
How: Group sessions, mentoring during the school year and work experience were delivered in-person. Follow-on mentoring was delivered both in-person and online.	pp.13-14
Where: The intervention was delivered in five secondary schools and two PRUs in London. Initial group sessions and mentoring took place at the schools. Work experience placements were organised with local employers.	pp.13-14
When and how much: The programme lasted 18 months. Group sessions ran from September to February of Year 11, mentoring from September to June of Year 11, work experience in December (of Year 11 or 12?), and follow-on mentoring during the post-16 phase.	pp.13-14
Tailoring: Group sessions followed a set curriculum. Mentoring was tailored to each student's needs.	pp.13-14
Modifications: Based on feedback from Cohort 1, several modifications were made for Cohort 2. Recruitment was enhanced by involving YCLs in the selection process and by introducing a 'taster' session to ensure better alignment between young people and the programme's goals. YCL training was strengthened with additional safeguarding support. Group sessions saw improved coordination with schools to avoid scheduling issues. The programme was also withdrawn from both PRUs. This was due to the transient student populations, variable attendance, and competing social-emotional interventions, which disrupted delivery and engagement.	pp.16-18
How well (planned): Successful implementation with cohort 2 was measured through a pre-post participant survey, routinely collected programme data, an appraisal of YCLs' competencies from the Head of Delivery, and qualitative interviews.	pp.26-29

How well (actual): The implementation of Career Ahead was variable. YCLs formed strong relationships with participants and offered relevant and helpful advice and support. However, both the group sessions and work experience received mixed feedback from students and YCLs, exposure to the intervention was less than intended, and recruitment challenges persisted.	pp.48-66

Table 2: TIDieR description of the Career Ahead intervention

Target population

The programme targeted year 11 students (young people aged 15-to-16) who would benefit from strengthening their non-cognitive skills to reduce their risk of NEET once they left school. YCLs and the Head of Educational Partnerships (HoEP) at MtL worked with senior leadership, heads of year and the pastoral team within the schools to identify students about whom they had concerns regarding their non-cognitive skills and their progression to a post-16 placement. Further detail on the recruitment processes and how it was improved is provided in the Programme Modifications section below. Students with Special Education Needs (SEN) that might limit their ability to engage in group activity were not part of the target population.

Programme activities

The programme comprised four core activities. Each of these activities was supposed to happen at a specific time from September to August in year 11 and from September to March during post-16 placements. More information on the programme activities and their expected contribution to non-cognitive skill development and EET outcomes can be found in the Career Ahead Theory of Change section below. All young people were expected to participate in all activities. The intended participant journey for these activities is outlined in figure 1 above.

- Group sessions (Sep-Feb of year 11): delivered in school with 10 to 12 students, each lasting the length of a lesson (roughly 1 hour). The topics included asset building lessons, which helped them to develop their ability to take control of their actions, set, plan and work towards achieving goals, as well as building confidence, professionalism, and resilience. There were 14 distinct workshops, which were delivered over 12 weekly sessions from September to December. A manual was provided for each session for YCLs to adhere to. Between January and April, students then engaged in a series of unstructured 'Research and Apply' sessions, during which students would receive practical help searching and applying for school leaver opportunities. No target level of exposure was set for these sessions – they would be held on a weekly basis but with the understanding that, due to increased pressure on students' timetables in the approach to their GCSE exams, participation may be variable.

- Mentoring (Sep-June of year 11): Unstructured (non-manualised) and tailored one-to-one support with students to reinforce learning from the workshops and which offered personalised emotional and practical support in a confidential environment. Sessions were flexible in length, ranging from short check-ins (10 minutes) to lengthy conversations (1 hour). Follow-on mentoring during the post-16 phase transitioned to a hybrid model, combining in-person and virtual sessions to accommodate students' post-school schedules. No target level of exposure was set for mentoring, given the intensity of delivery was expected to vary depending on the needs of each student.
- Work experience (Dec of year 11[1]): Students participated in a one-week, structured work placement with a large international outsourcing and professional services company in Central London. Originally, Career Ahead intended for MtL to leverage existing partnerships to offer varied placements tailored to students' interests, but the shift to home-working due to COVID-19 limited the availability of hosts. During the placement, students engaged with speakers from the company who shared insights about their career paths and developed a PowerPoint presentation on a company-related topic, designed to support their non-cognitive skill development by enhancing their communication skills.
- Follow-on mentoring (Sep-Mar of post-16 placement): Continued one-to-one intervention with young people to support their transition to a post-16 placement.

Youth Career Leads

Each activity was delivered by the YCL, who was a part-time member of staff at MtL with a background in youth work and facilitation. Given the role's requirement for expertise across multiple domains, recruiting candidates with high levels of experience in every area was challenging. Emotional intelligence and the ability to connect with young people were essential, as was relatability to participants through shared experiences, such as having grown up and attended school in London and belonging to a racially minoritised community—backgrounds common among many programme participants. For the other areas relevant to the role, including careers knowledge, group facilitation, and mentoring, candidates were selected based on demonstrated potential rather than prior experience. To support skill development, a comprehensive implementation support

[1] This was separate to any work experience arranged by the schools. In England, this mostly takes place when students are in year 10. However, due to COVID, no opportunities for work experience were arranged for students in either cohort.

package, including regular, intensive training and coaching, was provided to develop candidates ahead of delivery and throughout their first year in the role.

During Cohort 1, three YCLs delivered Career Ahead in two schools each, and another one YCL delivered in one school. During Cohort 2, only one YCL delivered the programme in two schools, with the remaining three delivering in one school each.

Implementation support

YCLs were recruited, trained, and supervised by the Head of Delivery (HoD) at MtL. Their support included:

- Experiential one-week training delivered by the HoD when the YCLs started
- Coaching and peer learning sessions for a full day every Wednesday provided opportunities for practical and emotional support
- HoD provided tailored and issue-specific advice during ad hoc calls following group and mentoring sessions (made at YCLs' discretion)
- Regular observation (twice a term) and subsequent feedback ensured HoD could assess YCL's delivery in practice
- HoD used information from their case notes, and observations and conversations with YCLs to develop professional development plans with YCLs, which tracked performance across competencies.

Programme modifications

A key aim of this evaluation was to support the ongoing development of the intervention. The methods guiding this process are outlined in the Methods chapter. This section details the programme modifications that the evaluation team and MtL collaboratively designed and implemented before Cohort 2, informed by learning from Cohort 1, in three areas: participant recruitment, implementation support and group sessions.

Participant Recruitment

The recruitment process for Cohort 1 was light touch. Following a phone conversation between the HoEP and the school lead, the school lead shared a flyer outlining the general profile of student that was likely to benefit from Career Ahead (at risk of NEET due to challenges in developing non-

cognitive skills). The school then independently identified 10-to-12 students to participate in the programme.

This recruitment process led to some misalignment; while some schools chose some participants based on behavioural concerns, rather than who might benefit from the programme, others were reluctant to select students with too high a level of need. This meant that some YCLs felt some students from less disadvantaged backgrounds were selected who may not have been best placed to benefit. At the same time, participation had been mandatory, which YCLs felt had undermined engagement, an issue observed in studies of other positive youth development interventions (Evans et al., 2015).

In Cohort 2, two key changes were made to the recruitment process. First, an inaugural meeting was introduced between the HoEP, the school lead, and the YCL.in each school. During this meeting, the HoEP and YCL collaborated with the school lead to review a long list of potential participants, identified based on an initial conversation with the HoEP. The school provided risk factor data for each student, including eligibility for free school meals, predicted GCSE grades, and attendance. Together, they created a final shortlist on a case-by-case basis, using both the data and the school lead's expertise, sometimes supported by other school staff (e.g., pastoral leads, heads of year). This process aimed to enhance schools' understanding of the criteria while using a long-list/short-list approach to form well-balanced groups—students from varying levels of disadvantage who could benefit from Career Ahead and participate meaningfully in a group setting.

The eligibility criteria—students at risk of becoming NEET due to challenges in developing non-cognitive skills—remained broad to accommodate the complex nature of "at risk of NEET" identification. For example, a student might excel academically but still face NEET risks due to behavioural issues, while another with poor attendance may have alternative support. Instead of rigid data thresholds, recruitment decisions considered a holistic view of each student's situation, drawing on teachers' insights alongside risk data.

The second change introduced a 'taster' session before the first group meeting. This informal session, led by the YCL, allowed prospective participants to get to know each other and gave the YCL an opportunity to assess students' suitability for Career Ahead. It also enabled students to decide if they wanted to participate.

Implementation support

One area for improvement was identified regarding implementation support from the HoD by YCLs following the end of Cohort 1. Some YCLs felt they would have benefited from further training on identifying and progressing safeguarding issues. To address this concern, the HoD prior to the start of Cohort 2, this included greater support for YCLs on dealing with safeguarding concerns, including a list of organisations and resources they could refer students to for extra support.

Group sessions

YCLs experienced significant challenges in delivering group sessions during Cohort 1. Five out of the seven groups started several months late in early 2022, due to difficulties faced by the HoEP in recruiting schools to the programme, many of whom lacked the capacity to consider additional interventions while they were still dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and its legacy. These problems were compounded by scheduling issues: a lack of co-ordination between YCLs and schools meant that there were scheduling clashes in students' timetables.

Prior to the start of Cohort 2, the evaluation team and MtL designed an adaptation to the student recruitment phase: during in-person discussions around recruitment, the HoEP and the YCLs would make time to explain what they needed to deliver the programme to a high-standard and why, and clarify any questions schools might have, to ensure better collaboration.

Evaluation aims and research questions

To support the development of a much-needed intervention, the aims of this evaluation were three-fold:

1. Develop and test the programme theory underpinning Career Ahead;
2. Design and deliver improvements to the Career Ahead model; and
3. Test aspects of evaluation design to inform a next-stage evaluation.

1. Develop and test the programme theory

The programme theory was captured in the form of a theory of change for this study, and was developed in collaboration with MtL prior to the start of delivery with Cohort 1. This was revised following learning from Cohort 1. The theory of change is shared in full form on page 19. Further information on the theory development process can be found in the Methods chapter.

The theory of change was divided into eight sub-theories. Each sub-theory concerned one of four key areas of Career Ahead's causal pathway: implementation, intermediate outcomes, ultimate

outcomes and unintended consequences. Their articulation of the causal pathways in these four areas gave rise to the research questions (RQs) that guided the design and delivery of the evaluation.

- **RQ 1:** To what extent was Career Ahead successfully implemented, with whom, under what circumstances and why?
- **RQ 2:** How did implementation contribute to any reported changes in students' non-cognitive skills, for whom, under what circumstances, and why?
- **RQ 3:** How did students' non-cognitive skills contribute to any reported changes in EET outcomes, for whom, under what circumstances and why?
- **RQ 4:** How did implementation contribute to any reported unintended consequences, for whom, under what circumstances, and why?

RQs 2 to 4 are framed differently to RQ 1. Whereas RQ 1 begins with 'to what extent', RQs 2 to 4 begin with 'how'. Rather than being focused on the extent to which the changes hypothesised in these questions were realised across all students in the cohort, RQs 2 to 4 are more concerned with fully understanding the causal processes underlying these changes. In other words, they are more concerned with how, why and for whom changes took place. Focusing on cohort-level change would be premature given the latter stages of the theory of change are untested. Therefore, they warrant further attention before Career Ahead is evaluated against this theory. Doing so would risk Career Ahead being held accountable to an imperfect model that does not fully or accurately reflect the way it works. Instead, RQs 2 to 4 are focused on exploring and refining explanations about for whom Career Ahead is expected to work, under what circumstances, and why – in other words, the central focus of this evaluation's first aim.

Career Ahead was intended to support transitions into EET through the development of non-cognitive skills and cultural capital. However, non-cognitive skill development was prioritised during this evaluation. This is because MtL identified it as the primary mechanism of change and focus of the intervention, based on their experience of supporting students into EET opportunities over the last 20 years. It is also where most of the programme's resources are directed. Further research is needed on the contribution of Career Ahead to the development of cultural capital and the subsequent contribution of this capital to positive EET outcomes.

2. Design and deliver improvements to the Career Ahead model

As described above, the evaluation team, comprising both evaluators and service designers, facilitated two rounds of improvements to the Career Ahead model. This included one before the start of delivery for each cohort. The process we followed is outlined in the Methods chapter.

3. Test aspects of evaluation design to inform a next-stage evaluation

It quickly became clear during the project that the evaluation's ability to offer value on aim 3 would be limited. Given the programme's nascency and the challenges experienced with data collection and implementation, it soon became evident that an efficacy study would not be appropriate for Career Ahead, especially given the associated scaling and data collection demands. Therefore, this evaluation focused on aims 1 and 2.

The Career Ahead Theory of Change

Each of the eight sub-theories in the theory of change is structured as a realist matrix (Ebenso, et al. 2019), which we adapted using the amended CMO framework proposed by Dalkin, et al. (2015). This framework constitutes four components:

- **Mechanism Resource**: The resources offered to a particular stakeholder (e.g. YCLs or young people), such as training and coaching or the support offered by YCLs to young people.
- **Mechanism Response**: The participants' reasoning and reactions to the resources provided, which drive behavioural changes.
- **Context**: The conditions or environment in which the intervention takes place or that shape how different people interact with an intervention, which influence how mechanisms are activated.
- **Outcome**: The result or change produced when mechanisms are activated within a specific context

The structure of the adapted realist matrix is visualised in figure 2 below. Each one is articulated using the "If…then…" format that is typical in realist evaluations.

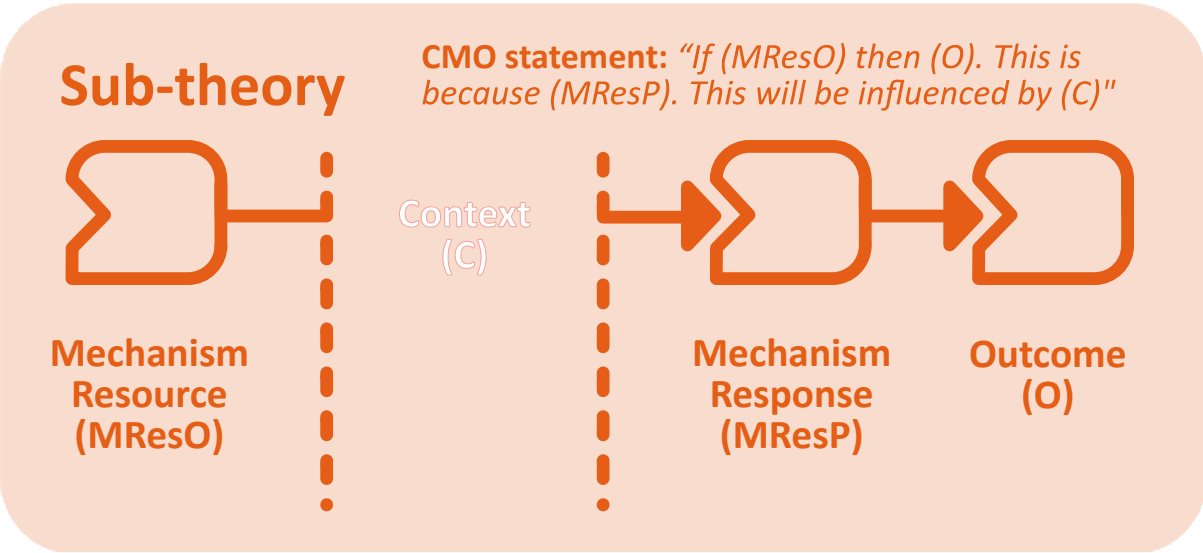

Figure 2: Amended CMO sub-theory framework and its components

The sub-theories related to RQs 1 to 3 (those concerning implementation, intermediate outcomes, and ultimate outcomes) were inter-related, with each setting the conditions for the one to follow:

- The outcomes of sub-theories 1 (recruiting students), 2 (school partnerships) and 3 (corporate partnerships) were contextual factors that shaped the functioning of sub-theory 4 (high quality delivery).
- The outcome of sub-theory 4 (high quality delivery) was also the mechanism resource of sub-theory 5 (developing skills and capital).
- The outcome of sub-theory 5 (developing skills and capital) was also the mechanism resource of sub-theory 6 (entering education, employment or training).

This causal pathway, which applies to all participants, constitutes Career Ahead's theory of change and is outlined in figure 3 below.

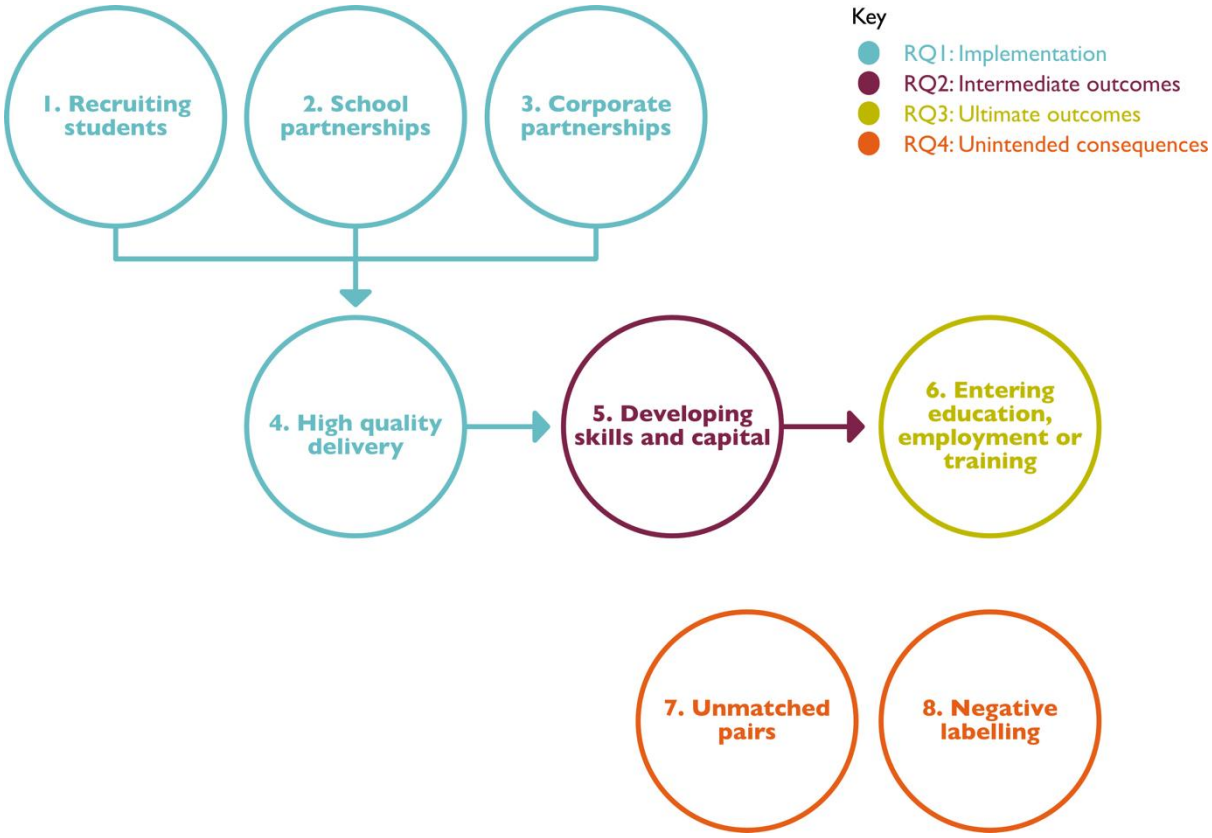

*Figure **3**: The Career Ahead Theory of Change*

Each sub-theory is described below in full.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: To what extent was Career Ahead successfully implemented, for whom, under what circumstances and why?

Sub-theory 1. Recruitment: ***If*** the HoEP provides school leads with a clear understanding of Career Ahead and the target population (those who would benefit from strengthening their non-cognitive skills to reduce their risk of NEET.) and gives them time and space to discuss with others and ask questions (**MResO**), ***then*** young people selected to participate in the programme will be those most likely to benefit (**O**). ***This is because*** school staff will be able to align the profile of students sought by Career Ahead with their existing knowledge of their students (**MResP**). ***This will depend on*** whether school staff already know enough about young people's strengths and challenges and are able to prioritise the recruitment process (**C**).

HoEP recruitment support (MResO)	**School context** (Context)	**Profile alignment** (MResP)	**Reach** (Outcome)
• HoEP clearly explains Career Ahead's selection criteria to school leads: young people 'at risk' of NEET due to challenges with non-cognitive skills. • HoEP gives school leads enough time (min 1 week) to discuss possible participants with senior leadership and/or the pastoral team • HoEP and the allocated YCL meet with the school staff involved to consider a long-list of potential participants, and work together to identify the final shortlist on a case-by-case basis. Applying the criteria to specific young people supports schools' understanding.	Between them, school leads, senior school leadership and/or the pastoral team • Have sufficient knowledge and insight into students' strengths and challenges to accurately identify those who would benefit from strengthening their non-cognitive skills to reduce their risk of NEET. Can devote time and energy to identifying appropriate candidates for Career Ahead	School leads, senior school leadership and/or the pastoral team align profile of students captured in Career Ahead's selection criteria with their own understanding of student needs and strengths	Reach – young people selected to participate in the programme are those that are 'at risk' of NEET due to a lack non-cognitive skills and are therefore those most likely to benefit from the programme.

Sub-theory 2. School partnerships: ***If*** MtL senior management identify and work closely and set clear expectations with school champions and engage in frequent and varied communication with school staff (**MResO**), then schools will support rather than impede implementation (e.g. letting young people out of class) (**O**). ***This is because*** school staff will understand what Career Ahead requires of them and be motivated to act accordingly (**MResP**). ***This will depend on*** whether school staff are sufficiently aligned with Career Ahead's values from the outset and have the capacity to engage with and deliver on their responsibilities (**C**).

HoEP school support (MResO)	**School context** (Context)	**School lead engagement** (MResP)	**Enabling school partnership** (Outcome)
• At the start of the year, HoEP and the school draft and sign a school-level agreement, which sets out the core responsibilities for both the school and MtL as part of their working relationship. This helps to set expectations, which reduces the frequency and severity of problems emerging over the school year due to a lack of alignment. • HoEP establishes positive working relationships with school leads by: (i) being open and honest with them i.e. communicating concerns quickly, being clear on programme boundaries, and acting with integrity (i.e. delivering on commitments and not overpromising); (ii) listening actively to them and remaining flexible enough to respond to school priorities (e.g. wider careers objectives) and concerns • HoEP communicates regularly with the school career leader (at least once a week during the initial phases) and retains flexibility to respond to issues as they arise. • HoEP communicates regularly with the YCLs to ensure they are up to date on any issues with the schools	• School leads have limited teaching responsibilities (less than 10 hours a week) and are therefore responsive to communications with HoEP/YCLs and are able to focus time and energy on Career Ahead • When school leads remain in post for the duration of the programme, this will help to ensure momentum is maintained. When they leave, this can create difficulties e.g. loss of open communication channels.	• School leads understand their role and the role of their school in supporting delivery of Career Ahead • School leads are motivated and able to champion Career Ahead in school, with both leadership and teaching staff. • School leads are able to problem-solve quickly in collaboration with HoEP	• School staff facilitate participation in Career Ahead (e.g. teachers letting participants out of class to attend group or individual sessions, space made in school schedule for extracurricular activities including trips/work experience) • School staff facilitate delivery of Career Ahead (e.g. provision of space for group sessions, chairs, any materials YCLs need).

Sub-theory 3. Corporate partnerships: ***If*** MtL senior management identify and work closely employers (**MResO**), ***then*** employers will secure suitable work experience opportunities for young people, as well as EET opportunities upon leaving school (**O**). ***This is because*** employers will understand what Career Ahead is, what it does and what their role is, and be motivated to act in alignment with that role (**MResP**). ***This will depend on*** whether employers are sufficiently aligned with Career Ahead's values from the outset have the capacity to engage with and deliver on their responsibilities (**C**).

MtL employer support (MResO)	**Engagement and buy-in** (Context)	**Employer alignment** (MResP)	**Enabling corporate partnership** (Outcome)
• MtL ensure prospective partners are sufficiently able and motivated to provide placements, insight visits and concrete, opportunities for this cohort (i.e. young people with behavioural challenges), prior to inviting them to collaborate on Career Ahead. • MtL communicate to partners that they are a well-run, long-standing community-based organisation with a strong record of doing impactful work with young people and working well with corporate partners. • MtL research what each prospective partner's CSR priorities are, so that they can demonstrate they are well-placed to help them tackle those priorities. • HoEP provides practical support to help corporate partners design placements, visits and EET opportunities that are participatory, varied and engaging, while tailoring these activities to fit each partner's CSR goals and preferences.	• Young people are sufficiently able and motivated to engage well corporate partners – they attend sessions, turn up on time, and meet minimally acceptable standards of behaviour. • There is senior leadership buy-in within corporate partners for engagement in Career Ahead	• Able and experienced corporate partners are sufficiently motivated to engage in a long-term collaboration with MtL, because they are convinced that MtL are the best option to help them meet their CSR needs. • Corporate partners develop a good understanding of the core characteristics MtL are looking for regarding their engagements (participatory, varied and engaging), but still feel ownership over these engagements, too, due to the way in which they've been tailored.	Corporate partners facilitate work experience placements and insight visits that are varied, engaging and participatory. Some corporate partners also offer some young people EET opportunities

Sub-theory 4. High quality delivery: ***If*** (YCLs) receive high quality implementation support (**MResO**), ***then*** Career Ahead's activities will be successfully implemented with fidelity. (**O**). ***This is because*** YCLs will acquire the necessary skills to deliver the programme as intended (**MResP**). ***This will depend on*** whether YCLs are sufficiently capable and motivated when they join MtL and whether schools and employers support implementation (**C**).

Implementation support (MResO)	**Recruitment and school and corporate partnerships** (Context)	**YCL competencies** (MResP)	**High quality delivery** (Outcome)
• One-week initial training led by expert coach • Programme is clearly manualised • Monthly coaching and peer learning sessions for a full day provide opportunities for practical and emotional support • HoD provides tailored ad hoc support following group and mentoring sessions • Regular observation (twice a term) and subsequent feedback • HoD sets professional development plans with YCLs, which track performance across competencies and set performance-related goals • YCLs join MtL already possessing high levels of the 'connecting', 'group skills' and 'emotional intelligence' competencies	**Outcome of sub theory 1 (recruitment)** • Participants would benefit from strengthening their non-cognitive skills to reduce their risk of NEET – Career Ahead addresses their needs. **Outcome of sub theory 2 (school partnerships)** • Schools support rather than impede implementation **Outcome of sub-theory 3 (corporate partnerships)** • Employers facilitate work experience placements, insight visits and EET opportunities	YCLs develop their competencies to a high level, including: • Connecting: Relatable and enthusiastic, while maintaining professionalism and discipline • Group skills: Competent and confident group facilitators • Emotional intelligence: Recognise distress and know when and how to follow up • Following core guidance: Adhere to the curriculum for group sessions and the guidance for mentoring • Careers knowledge: Possess reliable, up-to-date, personalised and localised careers knowledge • Organisational skills: Plan sessions well and enter data regularly and to a high standard	Activities are successfully implemented with fidelity • The curriculum facilitates active learning, which supports participants to engage more of their resources as they pursue goals, facilitating recall and deeper understanding. • YCL-participant relationships characterised by unconditional positive regard and empathy. This enables participants to engage in the direction offered by YCL • YCLs offer, up-to-date personalised and localised practical support to young people as they attempt to pursue EET-related goals • YCLs and employers work together to expose participants to different workplace cultures • Participants engage in a sufficient number of sessions for a sufficient duration (frequency + exposure).

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: How did implementation contribute to any reported changes in students' non-cognitive skills, for whom, under what circumstances, and why?

Sub-theory 5. Developing non-cognitive skills: ***If*** YCLs deliver the curriculum as intended, form strong YCL-participant relationships, offer practical support, and expose participants to different workplace cultures (**MResO**), ***then*** participants will develop non-cognitive skills (**O**). ***This is because*** these resources will help young people to engage in a development cycle (**MResP**). ***This will depend*** on whether environments in participants' lives beyond Career Ahead reinforce, limit, or compete with Career Ahead's activities and their influence on engagement in this development cycle (**C**).

High-quality delivery (MResO)	**Wider influences** (Context)	**Development cycles** (MResP)	**Non-cognitive skills and cultural capital** (Outcome)
Outcome of sub-theory 4 (high quality delivery): Activities are successfully implemented with fidelity • The curriculum facilitates active learning, which supports participants to engage more of their resources as they pursue goals, facilitating recall and deeper understanding. • YCL-participant relationships characterised by unconditional positive regard and empathy. This enables participants to engage in the direction offered by YCL • YCLs offer, up-to-date personalised and localised practical support to young people as they attempt to pursue EET-related goals • YCLs and employers work together to expose participants to different workplace cultures • Participants engage in a sufficient number of sessions for a sufficient duration	Participants' environments beyond Career Ahead (e.g. school and post-16 setting) influence engagement in cycles through influencing: • Participants' perceptions of negative vs positive expectations • Pressure to conform to pro/anti social norms • Relationships with positive/negative role models • Exposure to positive/negative developmental experiences Stronger, more positive influences may reinforce participants' efforts to engage in development cycles. Stronger, more negative influences may limit their efforts.	Participants engage in a development cycle, whereby they • Identify goals based on an assessment of their their strengths and challenges concerning EET • Pursue those goals • Overcome obstacles along the way	Young people develop their non-cognitive skills, including • Confidence • Motivation • Aspiration • Resilience • Communication • Teamwork Young people develop their cultural capital (a knowledge of and familiarity with the norms and expectations of different workplace cultures)

RESEARCH QUESTION 3: How did students' non-cognitive skills contribute to any reported changes in EET outcomes, for whom, under what circumstances and why?

Sub-theory 6. Entering education, employment or training: ***If*** young people develop non-cognitive skills (**MResO**), ***then*** this will help them to engage in education, employment and training (EET) opportunities (**O**). ***This is because*** these skills will help to protect them against risks in their environment that threaten this transition, and to capitalise on supportive elements that might support it (**MResP**). ***This will depend on*** the balance of these risks; the higher the number and severity of risks, the greater the pressure on participants' skill levels, while the more supportive their environment, the less the degree of pressure and the better able participants are to capitalise on their skills (**C**).

Non-cognitive skills and cultural capital (MResO)	**Wider influences** (Context)	**Protecting and empowering** (MResP)	**Entering EET** (Outcome)
Outcome of sub-theory 5 (developing non-cognitive skills): Young people develop cultural capital and non-cognitive skills, including: • Confidence • Motivation • Aspiration • Resilience • Communication • Teamwork **Follow-on mentoring:** YCLs continue to mentor students six months post-year 11, to reinforce the contribution of cultural capital and non-cognitive skills to entering EET.	As with sub-theory 5, participants' environments (including school and their post-16 setting) will influence whether the mechanisms operate as intended, via the degree to which they shape expectations, social pressure, role models and exposure to developmental experiences. The greater the number and strength of positive influences, the more opportunity participants will have to capitalise on these supports in pursuit of EET. The greater the number and strength of negative influences, the greater the strain on the amount of skills/capital required to buffer and compensate participants from these influences.	Non-cognitive skills and cultural capital act as coping mechanisms and positive assets, helping to: • **Protect** students against risks in their environment that might facilitate negatively influence their ability to engage in EET. • **Empower** students to capitalise on other parts of their environment (e.g. other supportive relationships/social networks to help them take advantage of any available EET opportunities).	Young people engage in an EET opportunity by end of programme that aligns with their goals and aspirations. Young people remain in EET at six months following the end of year 11.

RESEARCH QUESTION 4: How did implementation contribute to any reported unintended consequences, for whom, under what circumstances, and why?

It is important that evaluations of public health programmes consider unintended consequences and adverse effects, given that the potential of interventions to cause harm is well established (Dishion et al., 1999). It is also important to consider them not just in retrospect, but to theorise and collect and analyse data on them in anticipation, due to the benefits of being theory-informed more generally; that is, that systematically gathering evidence on the mechanisms, outcomes and relevant contextual factors that constitute a potential unintended consequence helps supports the triangulation of evidence and subsequently increases confidence in the findings regarding that consequence.

Therefore, two unintended consequences were developed in advance of cohort 1 and incorporated into the theory of change. They were prioritised based on the previous experiences of MtL from other projects and on the adverse effects encountered by researchers in evaluations of other group-based, targeted, positive youth development and mentoring interventions, particularly Evans et al. (2015). They were also issues that, for different reasons, were either not addressed in advance of Cohort 1 or beyond the scope of MtL's influence.

- For sub-theory 7 (unmatched YCLs and participants), the logistical challenges of matching YCLs to students made the process impractical to implement.
- For sub-theory 8 (negative labelling), this was not a potentially adverse consequence that MtL had complete control over. Career Ahead, as a non-whole-school intervention, had limited control over the potential adverse consequence of negative labelling. While YCLs worked to enhance students' self-worth through mentoring and group sessions, MtL's capacity to mitigate external perceptions of the programme and its participants - and the potential impact on students' self-worth - was constrained.

Sub-theory 7. Unmatched YCLs and participants: ***If*** no consideration is given to the degree to which YCLs' and participants' interests and experiences align, (**MResO**), ***then*** this might limit the development of skills and capital (**O**). ***This is because*** it may limit the ability of YCLs to form strong relationships

with participants, which is an important driver of whether participants accept, follow and believe in the direction offered by YCL and Career Ahead (**MResP**). ***This will depend on*** the degree of perceived compatibility i.e. the extent to which participants feel they are incompatible with YCLs and vice versa (**C**).

Unmatched pairs (MResO)	**Incompatibility** (Context)	**Weak relationships** (MResP)	**Limited skills and capital** (Outcome)
Neither YCLs nor participants are given the opportunity to decide who they wish to be partnered with	Young people feel they are incompatible with YCL, and/or vice versa	YCLs are unable to form strong relationships with participants, which is an important driver of whether participants accept, follow and believe in the direction offered by YCL and Career Ahead	Development of skills and capital is limited

Sub-theory 8. Negative labelling: ***If*** Career Ahead communicates to young people that they are considered 'problematic' by schools and society, since candidates for the programme are identified based on whether they are deemed 'at risk' (**MResO**), ***then*** this might limit the development of skills and capital (**O**). ***This is because*** it may inadvertently formalise and strengthen perceptions among participants that little is expected of them, limiting their motivation to engage in development cycles (**MResP**). ***This will depend on*** the extent to which participants are already battling negative expectations in other relationships within their family/peers/school/ community. It will also depend on whether they have relationships with others that will help them to reframe their selection for Career Ahead as something positive (e.g. an opportunity) (**C**).

Negative labelling (MResO)	**Negative expectations** (Context)	**Lack of motivation** (MResP)	**Limited skills and capital** (Outcome)
By explicitly identifying candidates for the programme based on whether they are deemed 'at risk', Career Ahead communicates to young people that they are considered 'problematic' by schools and society.	• Participants are already battling negative expectations in other relationships with family/peers/school/wider community • Participants lack relationships that will help them to reframe their selection as something positive (e.g. an opportunity).	Perceptions among participants that little is expected of them are inadvertently formalised and strengthened, limiting their motivation to engage in development cycles.	Development of skills and capital is limited

About this report

The rest of the report is structured as follows:

- A **methods** section that describes the approach to theory development, data collection and analysis.
- A **findings** section that describes the findings related to each of the four RQs
- A **conclusion** that offers an overall interpretation of the findings and suggests directions for future research.

Methods

Evaluation timeline

Table 3 outlines when each activity in the study took place.

*Table **3**: Evaluation timeline*

Date	Activity
Cohort 1 (Sep '21 – Mar '23)	
Jun-Aug '21	Set-up, including ethics approval and development of theory of change, data capture tools and implementation infrastructure (YCL competencies and data system)
Oct '21	Participant pre-post survey baseline data collection by YCLs
Feb-Jul '22	EEG forms and meets four times
May-Jun '22	Qualitative data collection + analysis
Jun '22	Participant pre-post survey follow-up data collection by YCLs
Jul '22	Analysis of participant pre-post survey, routinely collected programme data such as referral data, and the coaching assessment by HoD
July-Aug '22	Synthesis of qualitative and quantitative data analysis
Aug '22	Feedback workshop to share findings with MtL; design sprint in which programme improvements were developed
Cohort 2 (Sep '22 – Mar '24)	
Oct '22	Participant pre-post survey baseline data collection by YCLs
Mar-Jun '23	Qualitative data collection + analysis
Mar '23	Participant pre-post survey follow-up data collection by YCLs
May-Aug '23	Analysis of participant pre-post survey, routinely collected programme data such as referral data, and the coaching assessment by HoD
Sep '23	Synthesis of qualitative and quantitative data analysis
Oct '23	Feedback workshop to share findings with MtL; design sprint in which programme improvements were developed for follow-on mentoring
Mar '24	Qualitative data collection and analysis
Mar '24	Analysis of routinely collected programme data on follow-on mentoring
Apr '24	Feedback workshop to share findings with MtL; design sprint in which organisational improvements were developed
Apr-Jun '24	Final report drafted
Jul-Nov '24	Revisions to report following peer review; dissemination of final report

Designing improvements to the model

MtL are a well-established non-profit organisation with over 20 years' experience designing and delivering non-cognitive skills development programmes across London. Prior to delivery of Career Ahead, they also possessed a strong network of school partners and corporate partners, making them well-placed to quickly establish delivery of the programme in schools and with work experience partners. However, Cohort 1 marked the first time Career Ahead had been delivered in full. MtL had no prior experience of working in PRUs or providing one-to-one mentoring. Their other interventions are short (less than 3 months) and delivered by volunteers or subcontractors on a project-by-project basis, for whom clear and considered professional development plans were surplus to requirements.

By contrast, Career Ahead was an 18-month intervention delivered by part-time employees on long-term contracts. As a result, much of the infrastructure required to support a long-running, multi-component intervention, including clear competencies for practitioners and a functioning data system, had to be developed anew in the pre-implementation phase. It was also acknowledged that much of the delivery model itself was likely to grow and develop throughout Cohort 1 as problems were encountered and responded to. Therefore, the evaluation team facilitated a process of intervention development by drawing on the first and second steps – Assess and Design – of Dartington Service Design Lab's Rapid-Cycle Design and Testing (RCDT) methodology (Green et al., 2021).

The 'Assess' phase of RCDT focuses on gaining a thorough understanding of the target population and service context through analysis of both internal and external research, alongside the development of a theory of change. Building on these insights, the 'Design' phase translates findings into practical resources—such as training manuals and service materials—created collaboratively with those delivering and using the service. In subsequent cycles of the Design phase, evidence gathered in line with the theory of change is used to identify priority areas for improvement, with solutions co-designed alongside practitioners. By incorporating a theory-, evidence-, and implementation-based approach and centring the experiences of practitioners and service users, this methodology aligns with best practice for intervention development (O'Cathain et al., 2019; Skivington et al., 2021).

In practice, this meant facilitating four rounds of programme improvement for Career Ahead.

- **Round 1 (Jun - Aug '21):** Focused on building the infrastructure and foundations surrounding the intervention during the pre-implementation phase for Cohort 1. The design of the data

system and of the framework for YCLs' professional development is described in detail in the 'data collection' section below.

- **Round 2 (Aug '22):** Focused on improvements to the delivery model, including recruitment and the design of group sessions, in advance of Cohort 2.
- **Round 3 (Oct '23):** Focused on improvements to follow-on mentoring, in advance of follow-on mentoring with Cohort 2.
- **Round 4 (Apr '24):** Focused on organisational improvements MtL could make based on what they had learned from delivering Career Ahead across both cohorts 1 and 2.

For rounds 2, 3 and 4, improvements were designed over a two-day 'design sprint' with MtL, during which we:

- Shared the findings from the evaluation in an accessible, engaging and user-friendly format, by condensing the findings into seven posters.
- Interpreted the findings together with the group by facilitating discussion around three questions often considered at critical junctures in the developmental evaluation field (Patton, 2010):
    - **What?** What are the insights telling us?
    - **So what?** What sense can we make of these emerging insights? What do they mean to us? Which insights seem more or less important?
    - **Now what?** Which options should we persevere with? Which should we change, or abandon altogether? And which new decisions need to be made to respond appropriately to emerging insights?
- Prioritised areas of focus, based on what was practical and likely to have the greatest impact on improving Career Ahead;
- Developed a long-list of ideas to address these areas; and
- Prioritised ideas to prototype before co-designing early-stage prototypes based on these ideas.

During the second improvement round, we also facilitated a session with the EEG that focused on improvements to the work experience component of the Career Ahead programme. The subsequent changes to the programme design will be discussed further in the Findings section below.

Experts-by-Experience Group (EEG)

Evidence suggests that those most severely disadvantaged by social, economic and health inequalities often fail to benefit from EET interventions as much as their less disadvantaged peers (Mawn et al., 2017). This unequal distribution of resources also shapes evaluation. The power evaluators have to frame research questions, methods, tools and findings can reinforce these dynamics, leaving less room for input from marginalised voices, including those of young people (Chicago Beyond, 2019). In response, the evaluation team established an Experts-by-Experience Group (EEG) at the beginning of the evaluation. The aims of this group were three-fold:

- To design improvements to the model to try and ensure all young people were able to benefit from Career Ahead.
- To design qualitative data collection tools that empowered young people to share their experiences in a way that aligned with their needs and preferences.
- To support EEG participants to develop research and evaluation skills and experience.

The EEG consisted of 10 young people that had taken part in a Career Ahead pilot during the 2021 summer holidays, as well as alumni from other programmes delivered by MtL. The group met four times for 90-120 minutes between February and July 2022. Participants were reimbursed for their time for each session. The first session was an introductory meeting to build trust and rapport, explain the proposed evaluation, clarify their contributions and commitment terms, agree ground rules and explain the basics of evaluation and evaluative thinking. The subsequent three sessions focused on co-designing qualitative collection tools for use with students and designing improvements to the work experience element specifically. Further detail is provided in the 'Data Collection' and 'Designing improvements to the model' sections below.

Theory of change development

The first version of the theory of change was developed prior to the start of delivery for Cohort 1, across July and August 2021. Minor iterations were made in advance of Cohort 2. These followed improvements made to the delivery model following learning from Cohort 1, including refinements to recruitment processes and strategies related to school partnerships, training, and coaching. The theory of change combined evidence and theory from academic literature with local stakeholder expertise to articulate high-level predictions regarding how Career Ahead was supposed to work, for whom, under what circumstances, and why, as well as what the unintended consequences of the intervention might be. The development process was informed by:

- A rapid evidence review to develop the theoretical foundations and underlying causal mechanisms of Career Ahead, given the model's development to date had been exclusively practice-led (see appendix 1). This process highlighted that the positive youth development field was particularly aligned with the philosophy and approach of Career Ahead and MtL. Systematic reviews of community-based positive youth development interventions, as well as reviews of process evaluations and theories of change for these interventions, played a central role in shaping the theory of change (e.g. Bonell et al., 2016).
- Reviews of programme documents, including the group sessions' curriculum
- Workshops and interviews with staff from MtL
- One workshop with the EEG to gather feedback on what a meaningful post-16 placement looks like
- Theory regarding unintended consequences was developed based on the previous experiences of MtL from other projects and on the adverse effects encountered by researchers in evaluations of other group-based, targeted, positive youth development and mentoring interventions, particularly Evans et al. (2015).

Evaluations based on theories of change have been criticised for failing to develop and test the causal logic of interventions in sufficient depth (Breuer, et al., 2016). Realist evaluation is well-placed to address this challenge (Blamey and Mackenzie, 2007; Rolfe, 2019). Realist evaluations begin by generating hypotheses regarding how programme mechanisms (M) lead to certain outcomes (O) in particular contexts (C) (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). These context-mechanism-outcome configurations, or 'CMOs', act as the fundamental building block of realist research, helping evaluators to establish "what works, for whom, under what circumstances and why". Theories of change can also address some of the shortcomings of realist evaluation. This includes retaining a focus on the whole intervention, providing a visual and more accessible format for engaging stakeholders in the evaluation, and supporting the identification and prioritisation of those elements of the theory deemed most important to test (Blamey and Mackenzie, 2007, Rolfe, 2019). For these reasons, this study combined theories of change and realist evaluation to develop and test the programme theory underpinning the Career Ahead model.

The theory of change is divided into eight sub-theories, each of which contributes to addressing one of the four RQs. The sub-theories related to RQs 1 to 3 (those concerning implementation, intermediate outcomes and ultimate outcomes) are inter-related, with each setting the conditions for the one to follow. This causal pathway, already shared through figure 3, is shared again in figure 4 below.

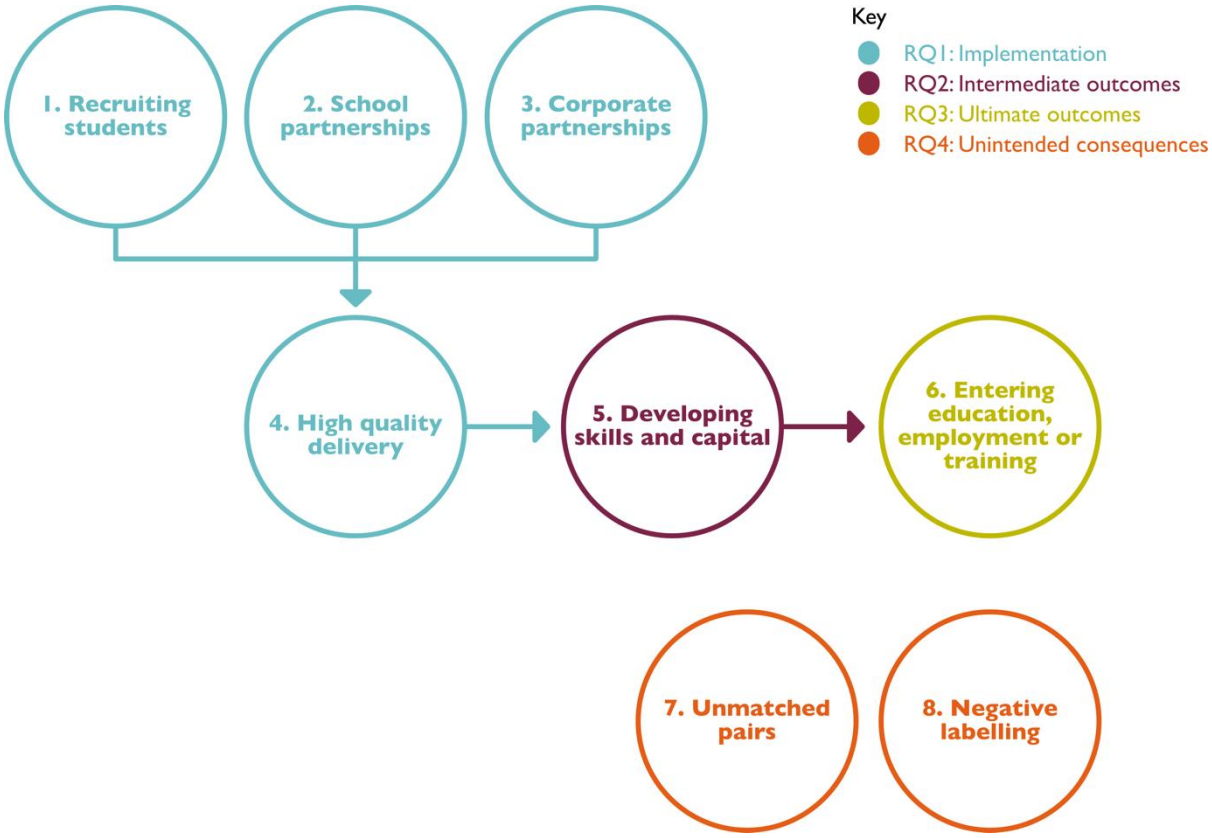

*Figure **4**: Causal pathway of Career Ahead's programme theory which addresses the 4 research questions*

Each sub-theory is structured as an adapted realist matrix (Ebenso, et al. 2019), a recommended method for developing, visualising and testing programme theory according to the UK Medical Research Council (Skivington et al., 2021). Using realist matrices enabled the integration of mechanisms and contextual factors into each sub-theory (Skivington et al. 2021). Most theories of change focus only on mechanisms at the point where programme resources interact with participant responses—how these resources influence participants' thoughts and behaviours. However, our goal was to understand how change occurred across the entire theory of change, not just at this point. Research on implementation and process evaluations often overlooks how and why implementation strategies affect implementation outcomes (Proctor et al., 2023). By using realist matrices, this evaluation was able to explore mechanistic relationships at this juncture and throughout the entire theory of change.

We altered the realist matrix structure developed by Ebenso et al. (2019) by using the amended CMO framework proposed by Dalkin, et al. (2015). This framework constitutes four components:

- **Mechanism Resource**: The resources offered to a particular stakeholder (e.g. YCLs or young people), such as training and coaching or the support offered by YCLs to young people.

- **Mechanism Response**: The participants' reasoning and reactions to the resources provided, which drive behavioural changes.
- **Context**: The conditions or environment in which the intervention takes place or that shape how different people interact with an intervention, which influence how mechanisms are activated.
- **Outcome**: The result or change produced when mechanisms are activated within a specific context.

The structure of the adapted realist matrix, already shared through figure 2, is visualised again in figure 5 below. The act of separating out resources from responses – the two defining features of mechanisms within realist methodology, alongside an explanation of the relationship between the two – helps evaluators to avoid conflating programme strategy with mechanisms, a common issue in realist evaluations (Pawson and Manzano-Santaella, 2012).

The result was a set of eight realist matrices that together capture Career Ahead's hypothesised causal pathways. Each one is articulated using the "If…then…" format that is typical in realist evaluations.

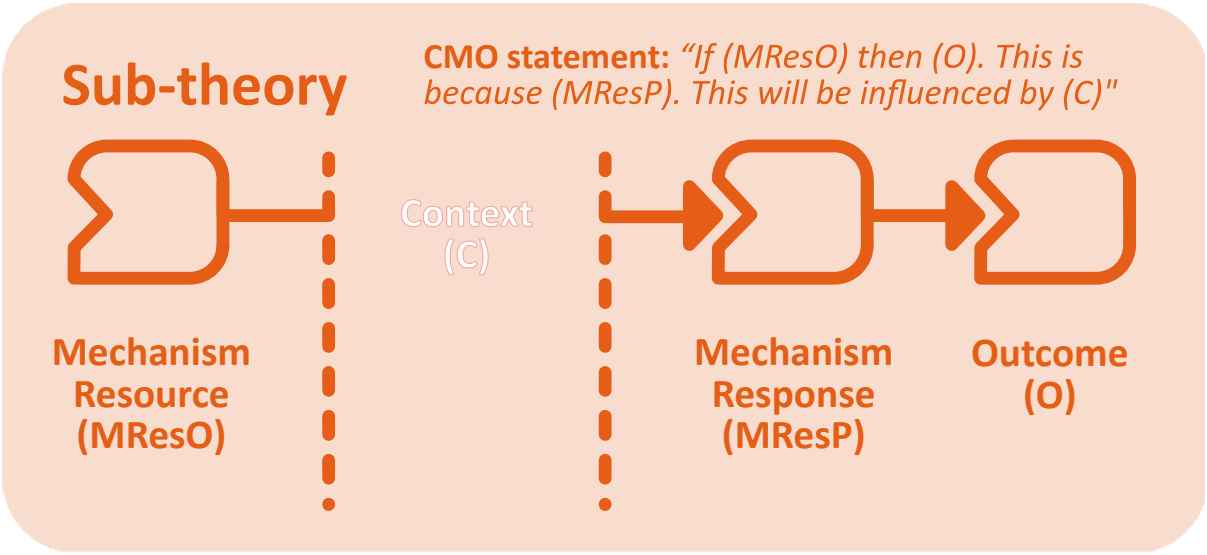

*Figure **5**: Amended CMO sub-theory framework and its components*

Participant selection

There were three sets of research participants in the evaluation: young people taking part in Career Ahead (students); the School Leads responsible for co-ordinating with MtL to support the delivery of the programme; and staff at MtL, including YCLs, the HoEP and the HoD. Due to challenges accessing corporate partners, they were not included in the evaluation.

All students participating in the intervention in both cohorts were eligible to participate in the evaluation. At the point of entry to Career Ahead:

- All students provided informed consent for the sharing of routine programme data
- Given students were under 18, all parents and carers provided informed consent for the sharing of routine programme data, the administration of the participant pre-post survey and the facilitation of qualitative interviews with students,.

Three rounds of primary qualitative data collection were conducted. The first, in May-June 2022, focused on the experiences of Cohort 1. The second and third, in March-June 2023 and March 2024, focused on Cohort 2, with the March 2024 round concerned with students' experiences following their transition from secondary school to their post-16 placement. Given Cohort 1's transition to post-16 placements overlapped with the start of delivery for Cohort 2, a decision was made collectively between YFF, MtL and the evaluation team not to collect data on Cohort 1's experience of post-16 placements during this phase. This allowed evaluation resources to be focused on Cohort 2. Only students and school leads from the five mainstream schools were invited to participate in Cohort 2. Due to the transient nature of the student population, the YCLs themselves faced challenges in accessing and engaging with students and school leads at the two PRUs. Given the reliance of the evaluation team on YCLs for access to these two stakeholder groups, this limited the evaluation team's ability to reach them for data collection.

Our sampling approach involved two steps during each round, which aligned with standard realist evaluation practice (Manzano, 2016):

- **Step one**: Purposive sampling to identify which research participant was deemed best placed to speak to a particular element of our theory of change;
- **Step two**: Maximum variation sampling to incorporate as wide a range of perspectives as possible.

The decision on the number of interviews conducted was informed by the principle that qualitative data yields diminishing returns as it approaches saturation. This consideration was balanced alongside concerns about resource management, research burden on MtL, and challenges accessing students to determine an appropriate number of interviews.

YCLs provided information sheets to potential student interviewees in line with this sampling approach. Those who expressed interest were then invited to interview. Informed consent was then

sought from students before an interview took place (more information on consent processes can be found in the 'Ethics' section below).

Data collection

The theory of change provided a framework for prioritising data collection, allowing the evaluation to focus resources strategically. Data was collected on each sub-theory in full except for sub-theory 2 (school partnerships) and sub-theory 3 (corporate partnerships). This prioritisation ensured that limited evaluation resources were used effectively, an important consideration in evaluations and feasibility studies (Skivington et al., 2021). The decision to exclude these sub-theories was based on their outcomes (supportive school and corporate partnerships) being embedded as contextual factors in sub-theory 4 (high-quality delivery). Consequently, insights into the roles of school and corporate partnerships within Career Ahead's causal pathway still emerged through the data collected, analysed and synthesised for sub-theory 4.

To guide the data collection process, the Career Ahead theory of change (except for sub-theories 2 and 3) was broken down into individual elements and inputted into a data collection table. This table set out the attributes of each element in further detail, alongside sources of the data, targets, participants, and the associated methods, building on the approach proposed by Funnell and Rogers (2011). Table 4 provides a high-level summary. Multiple sources of data were collected for most elements in our programme theory, facilitating a comprehensive degree of triangulation across the theory of change. Triangulation is an important feature of contribution analysis: a systematic, mixed methods and collaborative approach to measuring impact that informed the collection, analysis, and synthesis of data in this study (discussed further in the "Analysis" section below). The application of a data collection table is also consistent with how other evaluators have applied contribution analysis (e.g., Dybdal et al. 2010; Delahais and Toulemonde 2012).

Quantitative data collection covered two main areas: intermediate outcomes for students and implementation. For the former, a participant pre-post survey was designed by the evaluation team and delivered by YCLs as part of the introductory group session for both cohorts. Data on the latter were provided by MtL since they were collected as part of routine service delivery and monitoring. MtL also shared socio-demographic data on the backgrounds of students including age (and year group of students), gender, ethnicity and eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM) (as an estimate of socioeconomic status). Qualitative data collection included interviews with students, MtL staff and school leads. Further details on quantitative and qualitative data collection are provided in the following sections.

Sub-theory	Data collection methods	Participants / data sources
RQ 1: To what extent was Career Ahead successfully implemented, with whom, under what circumstances and why?		
1. Recruiting students	Pre-post participant survey; referral form; qualitative interviews	Students, YCLs, HoEP, YCLs and school leads
2. School partnerships	*Not a focus of data collection*	
3. Corporate partnerships	*Not a focus of data collection*	
4. High quality delivery	Pre-post participant survey; routinely collected programme data; coaching assessment from the HoD; qualitative interviews	Students, YCLs, HoD; students, YCLs, HoD, HoEP and school leads
RQ 2: How did implementation contribute to any reported changes in students' non-cognitive skills for whom, under what circumstances, and why?		
5. Developing non-cognitive skills	Pre-post participant survey; qualitative interviews	Students, YCLs, HoD, HoEP and school leads
RQ 3: How did students' non-cognitive skills contribute to any reported changes in EET outcomes, for whom, under what circumstances and why?		
6. Entering education, employment or training	Qualitative interviews	Students, YCLs and HoD
RQ 4: How did implementation contribute to any reported unintended consequences, for whom, under what circumstances and why?		
7. Unmatched pairs	Qualitative interviews	Students, YCLs, HoD, HoEP and school leads
8. Negative labelling	Qualitative interviews	Students, YCLs, HoD, HoEP and school leads

Table 4: Summary of data collection methods and participants/data sources corresponding to each research question

Minimisation of bias

To help minimise bias, YCLs received training from the evaluation team in how to collect data as part of routine service delivery (e.g., not asking leading questions, not influencing answers). The quantitative measures used have proven validity and reliability (Scandura, 1992; Dersham, 2020). Interviews were conducted by experienced and trained members of the evaluation team. Participants were told that the information they provided would be confidential and their comments reported anonymously.

Quantitative data: Intermediate outcomes

We conducted an appraisal of assessment tools for non-cognitive skills based on general reliability and validity, validity with young people, cultural and contextual appropriateness, and alignment with the specific skills Career Ahead targeted: confidence, motivation, aspiration, resilience, communication, and teamwork. As a result of this process, the Soft Skills construct within the WorkLinks Skills & Values Assessment Tool (WLSVA) (Dersham, 2020) was jointly selected by the evaluation team and MtL. The WLSVA is a 56-item self-report assessment tool constituting three construct groupings, the individual validity and reliability of which have been tested: Soft Skills, Earnings Skills, and Civic Values. The Soft Skills construct is 23 items. MtL and the evaluation team collaborated to make minor, cosmetic adjustments to the WLSVA to ensure it was accessible and culturally relevant for students, while preserving the original meaning of each item.

Quantitative data: Implementation

Implementation outcomes were drawn from existing frameworks, including EEF's Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE) handbook (Humphrey, et al., 2016) and others (Carroll, et al., 2007, Moore, et al., 2015), recommended in the latest UK MRC guidance for evaluations of complex interventions (Skivington, et al., 2021). The implementation outcomes this study considered included participant recruitment (reach), exposure, fidelity, and quality of delivery. These outcomes were prioritised as the most relevant to achieving the evaluation's aims. Acceptability and participant responsiveness were considered through the collection and analysis of data regarding participants' interaction with key programme mechanisms, given their conceptual overlap. As Moore et al. argue in the UK MRC's guidance for process evaluations of complex interventions, "*acceptability… should not be uncritically assessed, but examined with reference to its relationship to the mechanisms through which the intervention works*" (2015, p.47).

During the mobilisation phase the evaluation team worked closely with MtL to prepare them for collecting implementation data. First, we responded to unforeseen challenges faced by MtL regarding the set-up and maintenance of a high-functioning, user-friendly data inputting system, by assisting in their procurement of, and partnership with, a digital design agency. The resulting system was then used by YCLs to input implementation data from the start of cohort 1 (September 2021), which focused on exposure (number of group sessions/one-to-one sessions/work experience placements delivered/attended) and recruitment (proportion of students, groups and schools meeting eligibility criteria, retention).

Second, the evaluation team worked with the HoD to develop core competencies for YCLs (see appendix 2 for the full list of competencies) that their training and development could be tracked and supported against. These were then assessed at three timepoints (September 2021, March 2022 and August 2023) using the US-based National Institute for Health's (NIH) five-point proficiency scale: basic; novice; intermediate; advanced; expert (NIH, 2024). This assessment was based on information from the HoD's case notes, conversations with YCLs and observations of YCLs delivering group sessions.

Quantitative data on quality of delivery was also gathered using the self-report, nine-item Mentoring Functions Questionnaire (MFQ-9) (Scandura, 1992), which was selected by the evaluation team alongside MtL following an appraisal process similar to that which identified the WLSVA tool. Similar to the WLSVA, small cosmetic modifications were made to ensure the assessment was accessible and culturally appropriate for students, without altering the core meaning of each item.

The thresholds for "low", "average" and "high" scores for the MFQ-9 should be treated with caution. These were calculated using the mean and standard deviation values from the MFQ-9 results from 246 employed MBA students in the US (one standard deviation above or below the mean was the threshold for a "high" or "low" score respectively, while anything within one standard deviation was considered an "average" score (Castro and Scandura, 2004), and therefore may not be reflective of the UK context and age of the participants in this study. However, given this was a limitation shared among appropriate alternatives, many of which lacked any comparative dataset to support interpretation, the MFQ-9 was still selected following the appraisal process, due to its validity, reliability, acceptability among young people, relative brevity and close alignment with MtL's core non-cognitive skills.

Qualitative data

Primary qualitative data collection included interviews with students, school leads, YCLs, the HoD and the HoE. We conducted 57 interviews across three timepoints (see table 5). Fewer students

were interviewed at timepoint three (March 2024) because they had already left school and were in post-16 placements. YCLs had limited access to students at this stage, which in turn affected the evaluation team's ability to reach them.

Table 5: Number of qualitative interviews conducted

Research participant	**May – Jun 2022** *Cohort 1*	**Mar – Jun 2023** *Cohort 2*	**Mar 2024** *Cohort 2*	**Total**
Students	15	13	4	**32**
School leads	4	5	-	**9**
YCLs	4	4	3	**11**
HoD	1	1	1	**3**
HoE	1	1	-	**2**
Total	**25**	**24**	**8**	**57**

Topic guides

We built on Manzano's (2016) realist interview principles across all interviews by grounding the topic guide for each one in the relevant elements of the theory of change, as set out in the data collection table. For MtL staff interviewees, this included explicitly orientating them to the theory being evaluated and asking them to speak to that theory, based on their experience. To aid this process, topic guides for qualitative interviews were informed by those developed by Brand et al. (2019). Interview questions featured alongside associated theory, which was included as a reference in all topic guides. These topic guides also included open-ended exploratory questions to ensure that the evaluation remained open to alternative and unanticipated contextual factors and unintended consequences. For school leads, the topic guides were less explicit about the theory of change, given their unfamiliarity with some of the more complex and abstract elements of Career Ahead's underlying theory.

Interviews with students centred on an activity that was co-designed with the EEG, building on resources developed by others (Macedo, 2022). The topic guide can be found in appendix 3. Students were invited to think of their journey since they started the programme or since they left secondary school, depending on the data collection timepoint, using the metaphor of a hot air balloon ride. They were asked how they felt at the start of the journey, at the end, what were the sources of wind pushing them along, who was with them in their basket helping them, what stormy weather was getting in the way, and what sunny weather was making things easier. Emoji cards and

other prompts which drew from influencing factors identified by the EEG, were provided to stimulate reflection. Their engagement with Career Ahead was then discussed at the end.

This approach to data collection with students had several benefits, including (i) creating a fun and engaging activity for students, (ii) helping us to consider alternative influences to Career Ahead in their journey (an important part of contribution analysis); and (iii) helping us to simplify our reflections with students on mechanisms (the wind) and context (the basket, the stormy weather and the sunny weather).

Embedded case studies

For the first two rounds of data collection (May-June 2022 and March-June 2023), each of the students we interviewed was treated as an embedded case study (Yin, 2018). This meant they were each treated as sub-cases within the higher-level case under investigation (i.e., the programme). Embedded case studies are recommended tools for those conducting contribution analysis (Delahais and Toulemonde, 2012), due to the way in which they focus data collection and analysis on the journey of each sub-case through the programme. A common pitfall of theory-driven evaluations is that individual elements within programme theory can become "unconfigured" from one another, as the evaluation becomes more focused on the elements themselves, and less so on the relationships between them (Pawson and Manzano- Santaella, 2012).

Embedded case studies are also built on the same understanding of rigour as contribution analysis, a conceptualisation that focuses on the degree to which triangulated sources converge or diverge (Yin, 2018). To maximise the amount of data collected on each sub-case, YCLs and school leads were also asked in their interviews about the journey of each student we interviewed. Further detail on the way in which their perspectives were triangulated is provided in the "Analysis" section below.

Location of interviews

During the first two rounds of data collection, interviews with students took place in-person and on school premises. During the third round, interviews were carried out over the phone or via video call in the interests of providing the most convenient medium for students. Interviews with MtL staff and school leads were conducted online or over the phone during all three rounds of data collection, with informed consent obtained from all interviewees prior to the interview starting.

Changes to methods after the start of delivery

Much stayed the same in terms of focus and methodological approach throughout the study due to the level of continuity in the content of the theory of change. However, YCLs experienced challenges with data entry during Cohort 1. While the YCLs were experienced and qualified professionals, all four were using a new data system in a new post that included some aspects of delivery and working with young people that they were unfamiliar with. This reduced their capacity to embed new practices, which meant that they were unable to maintain the necessary levels of data completeness for both the pre-post participant survey and routinely collected programme data on exposure during the evaluation of Cohort 1. Following improvements to data collection processes and the YCLs' growing experience and proficiency in data collection and data entry, these challenges were largely solved in advance of Cohort 2.

Ethics

The Warren House Group Ethics Committee approved the ethics submission for this evaluation in September 2021 (see appendix 4).

Students and parents/carers provided informed consent for the collection and/or sharing of three types of data: routinely collected programme data, the participant pre-post survey, and qualitative interviews with students.

For students:

- Informed consent was obtained separately for each data collection activity, prior to the start of each.
- For programme data and the pre-post survey, YCLs distributed information sheets at the start of the intervention (Appendix 5), allowing students time to discuss participation before providing consent (Appendix 6).
- The pre-post survey was completed on school premises, with YCLs facilitating the process and providing guidance.
- For qualitative interviews, information sheets were shared, and students who expressed interest were interviewed with informed consent obtained at the start (Appendix 7).

For parents and carers:

- Informed consent for all data types was sought at the start of the evaluation to minimise research burden. Information sheets were sent via email and paper copies, with an option to ask questions or opt their child out (Appendix 8).

For school leads and MtL staff:

- Prospective participants were invited via email or phone to participate in semi-structured interviews, and informed consent was obtained (Appendix 9).

Data protection

The legal basis to collect, share and process data for this project was 'Legitimate Interest'. The legitimate interests identified were the broader societal benefits of the study's results, through advancing our collective understanding of whether, how, for whom and under what conditions Career Ahead might contribute to impact. A Legitimate Interests Balancing Test was carried out that confirmed the data to be collected was necessary for the evaluation to fulfil its aims (see appendix 10). A Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) was also carried out (see appendix (11) and a data sharing agreement signed with MtL on this basis (see appendix 12).

Analysis

The overarching analytical approach for the pilot phase of the study was informed by contribution analysis (Mayne, 2001). While more commonly used in policy and systems change evaluations, contribution analysis has several strengths that justified its use here:

- Its systematic approach to improving confidence about the relative contribution of interventions and associated mechanisms and contextual factors to results (Lemire, et al., 2012), a challenge observed in both realist evaluations (Marchal, et al., 2018) and those based on theories of change (Breuer, et al., 2016);
- Its attention to rival influences on impact, which theory-based evaluations sometimes overlook (Breuer, et al., 2016); and
- Its suitability for evaluations with ambitions of gathering evidence of an intervention's promise, but which lack comparison groups and large sample sizes (Lemire, et al., 2012).

Contribution analysis draws on the analysis and synthesis of qualitative and quantitative data. The details of what this involved in this evaluation are described below.

Contribution analysis: Constructing "contribution claims"

We applied contribution analysis to address the RQs in this evaluation by constructing "contribution claims." Contribution claims summarise the degree to which some or all the theory of change was verified whilst accounting for other key influencing factors (Mayne, 2012). There are five claims that summarise the evaluation's findings. They are reported in the executive summary and conclusion chapters and at the start of the findings for each RQ. They cover:

- For RQ1 (Implementation), we constructed one contribution claim focused on sub-theory 4 (High Quality Delivery). This was because sub-theories 1 (Recruitment), 2 (School Partnerships) and 3 (Corporate Partnerships) can be understood as contextual factors that influence the contribution of implementation support to high-quality delivery in sub-theory 4.
- For RQ 2 (Intermediate Outcomes), we constructed one contribution claim focused on sub-theory 5 (Developing non-cognitive skills)
- For RQ3 (Ultimate Outcomes), we constructed one contribution claim focused on sub-theory 6 (Entering education, employment, or training)
- For RQ 4 (Unintended Consequences), we constructed two contribution claims – one for each of sub-theories 7 and 8.

We adapted Delahais and Toulemonde's (2012) approach to constructing contribution claims to account for the four components within each sub-theory (mechanism resource, context, mechanism response, and outcome). Each contribution claim was assembled by compiling evidence on the extent to which:

1. The Outcome happened…
2. Due to the Mechanism Response…
3. Which was due to the Mechanism Resource…
4. The link between which was mediated by Context…
5. With rival influences having been considered.

Qualitative data analysis

Qualitative analysis was grounded in framework analysis (Ritchie and Spencer 1994). We used a form of framework analysis similar to that applied by Brand et al. (2019) during their realist formative process evaluation of an intervention to support prison leavers. We also built on the approach outlined in Gale et al. (2013), particularly their guidance for evaluation teams on best practice for the collective and consistent charting of data into a framework.

Microsoft Excel was used to build and apply our working analytical framework. The columns represented the individual elements of the theory of change which aligned with the data collection table, while the rows represented one type of data for one interview participant (e.g., one interview with a student). Every transcript was then coded against this framework, with each cell representing "*relevant evidence from one type of data for one participant in relation to one piece of programme theory*" (Brand, et al., 2019). Information entered in each cell considered "certainty" (i.e., the extent to which the evidence did or did not follow the pattern predicted in the relevant part of the theory of change) (Lemire, et al., 2012).

Quantitative data analysis

Data from the WSVA were subjected to descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. Basic descriptive statistics included examining data completeness, and the demographics of the sample with and without pre- and post-intervention data. Inferential statistical analyses included paired sample t-tests to measure whether outcomes changed from pre- to post-intervention. The MFQ-9, completed only at follow-up, was also subjected to basic descriptive analysis.

Summary statistics were used to describe implementation in terms of recruitment, attendance, fidelity, and quality, as well as the number and socio-demographic characteristics of the students recruited to Career Ahead. Insights from these analyses were added to the framework matrix, enabling us to apply an integrated and mixed methods approach during synthesis.

Summary statistics were used to describe the number and socio-demographic characteristics of students recruited to Career Ahead. Inasmuch as data permit, these were compared with school and neighbourhood statistics.

Synthesis

According to Delahais and Toulemonde (2012), "*The robustness of a contribution claim depends on the supporting items of evidence that may or may not be strong, convergent, and triangulated*" (p.287). Therefore, to synthesise our analysis, we developed a triangulation assessment. Building on the approach of Campbell et al. (2020), this involved establishing the degree of convergence between individuals (e.g., between students), across research participant groups (e.g., between YCLs and students) and across methods (e.g., between routinely collected programme data and interviews). The level of convergence at each level was described consistently using the framework developed by Farmer et al. (2006), which includes four categories: (1) full convergence; (2) partial convergence; (3) silence; and (4) divergence.

Evaluation limitations

The participant pre-post survey was administered by MtL and not independently by the evaluation team. The fact that completion of measures is higher for those who complete the intervention in evaluations that rely on programme data clearly leads to bias (those who complete measures are more likely to have engaged and done well). We recognise the importance and value of independently collected data in evaluations, but we support (and would advocate) for the use of existing programme data to evaluate intervention feasibility and early indications of promise. The reasons are two-fold: first, it reduces the data collection burden, as data collection can be embedded in programme delivery; and second, it supports delivery organisations to develop the skills and infrastructure to collect data themselves, improving their ability to learn and improve through evaluation even after the relationship with external evaluators has ended. That said, this needs to be balanced against the risk of this approach yielding high levels of missing data, which can make it harder to answer the research questions.

Second, this study did not include a counterfactual, as it was not designed to be an impact evaluation. This decision was appropriate given the small sample size, the programme being in an early stage of development, and the challenges of identifying a counterfactual without randomisation, especially with variable eligibility criteria. The focus of the evaluation was on developing our understanding of the programme theory and improving the intervention design rather than measuring cohort-level outcomes.

Third, while the study collected pre-post outcomes, it's important to note that, due to the small sample size, these results are indicative rather than definitive. The absence of measurable change in outcomes may suggest that the programme's effects are difficult to detect quantitatively within this design, but further research with larger sample sizes would be needed to draw firmer conclusions. As part of the qualitative data collection, we inquired whether positive changes observed by participants might be attributed to other developments in the young person's life besides the programme. While this was not always easy for participants to do, we contend that it is a helpful corrective to assuming uncritically that positive or negative change is caused by the programme.

Third, as previously highlighted, the thresholds for "low," "average," and "high" MFQ-9 scores, based on data from US MBA students, do not fully reflect the UK context or participant age in this study. Further research is needed on the MFQ-9 with young people in a UK context to develop mean and standard deviation samples specific to this context and age range.

Fourth, this evaluation prioritised gathering evidence on the primary intermediate outcome and mechanism of change in this intervention – non-cognitive skill development. It is possible that the

role and contribution of Career Ahead was underestimated due to the lack of attention paid to cultural capital. Further research is needed on the contribution of Career Ahead to the development of cultural capital and the subsequent contribution of this capital to positive EET outcomes.

Fifth, the small number of students (four) interviewed at timepoint three (March 2024), the reasons for which have been discussed above, limited the depth and breadth of evidence available to aid our understanding of students' experiences of follow-on mentoring support.

Findings

How to read

In this section, background information on students is provided before the findings relating to each of the four RQs is shared.

The contribution claims that summarise the findings for each RQ use abbreviations to signal which component of the sub-theory is being referenced in the statement, including abbreviations for mechanism resources (MResO), contextual factors (C), mechanism responses (MResP), and outcomes (O). Rival or alternative explanations are also highlighted (R). This is to ensure that (i) the findings can be clearly linked back to the theory of change and (ii) the findings explicitly advance our understanding of the contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes that explain how Career Ahead works. This approach adheres to the RAMESES guidelines for the reporting of realist evaluations (Wong et al., 2016).

The findings for each RQ will prioritise evidence from Cohort 2. Evidence from Cohort 1 is only referenced in relation to adaptations that were made to the model in advance of Cohort 2. This is to support the accessibility and coherence of the report.

As outlined above, references to the strength of evidence are built on the degree to which different sources of evidence converged. 'Strong' evidence is defined as full or fundamental convergence at two or more levels of triangulation, i.e. between individuals (e.g. between students); across research participant groups (e.g. between school staff and students) and across methods (e.g. between routinely collected programme data and interviews).

To ensure transparency while protecting readability, we used verbal markers of quantitative information to capture the number of students, YCL's and school staff who shared a particular view in interviews, as is common in the field of qualitative research (Maxwell et al., 2010; Sandelowski, 2001).

- 'Most' is used to describe views shared by a majority of interviewees (e.g., eight or more out of the 14 students interviewed in Cohort 2 in Mar-Jun 2023)
- 'A minority' is used to describe views shared by less than half of the interviewees.

Three case studies are included in the findings. Each of them brings together perspectives from both the YCL, the student and the school lead regarding the student's journey through Career Ahead. Each case study is given a pseudonym: Mia, Stefan and Jordan. Similarly, each of the schools is given a

pseudonym: Beech, Ash, Elm, Pine and Hazel. While three of the YCLs were allocated one each of Ash, Elm and Pine, one YCL delivered the programme in both Beech and Hazel. The case studies do not form part of the findings to RQ3, given only four students were interviewed during the post-16 round of qualitative data collection in March 2024. Therefore, there would be a risk of deductive disclosure.

Participants

The two participating PRUs withdrew from the programme prior to the start of Cohort 2, as MtL found that the group session structure was not viable in PRU settings during delivery with Cohort 1. This was because of the transient student population, variable attendance, the complex needs of students and the competition for student time with other social-emotional interventions in the school.

> HoD: *"These students… there is a lot of emotional difficulties that they're suffering with… if they come into school, and they decide that they don't want to attend a lesson, actually, there's interventions within the PRU that are there to deal with whatever has happened at home… what we found was, even with our sessions, if something kicked off at the PRU or, you know, they just decided that they were not going to come in, actually, there was counselling therapy or... there was some... some form of something that was included… it really disrupted our delivery and our ability to engage, to connect with students."*

58 students participated in Career Ahead in the remaining five secondary schools as part of Cohort 2, which started in September 2022. 51 (88%) were still participating by the end of year 11 (July 2023) (seven left the programme). 16 (27%) received at least one follow-on mentoring session between September 2023 and March 2024. Participants were spread evenly across the schools: each school had 12 participants except for Elm, which had 10.

Baseline characteristics

Tables 7 below describes the demographic characteristics of participants in Cohort 2. Most identified as male and Black/Black British. All missing data for gender and ethnicity was due to challenges faced by YCLS in collecting the information from young people. The proportion of students who were eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), predicted less than five 4-9s (A* to Cs) at GCSE or who had ever been excluded, either internally or externally, was also recorded. For those for whom there was data, roughly half had ever been excluded or were eligible for FSM and most were predicted fewer than five 4-9s at GCSE. The large proportion of missing data for these

characteristics was due to difficulties in acquiring this information from schools during the referral process, particularly at Pine.

Table 7: Baseline characteristics of Cohort 2 Career Ahead participants across the 5 school sites

Demographics	Beech (n = 12)	Ash (n = 12)	Elm (n = 10)	Pine (n = 12)	Hazel (n = 12)	Total (n = 58)
Gender – N (%)						
Female	-	6 (50%)	9 (90%)	2 (17%)	2 (17%)	19 (33%)
Male	9 (75%)	6 (50%)		9 (75%)	7 (59%)	31 (53%)
Missing	3 (25%)	-	1 (10%)	1 (9%)	3 (25%)	8 (14%)
Ethnicity – N (%)						
Black/Black British	6 (50%)	5 (42%)	3 (30%)	5 (42%)	7 (58%)	26 (45%)
White/White British	1 (9%)	2 (17%)	-	1 (9%)	-	4 (7%)
Asian/Asian British	1 (9%)	3 (25%)	-	-	-	4 (7%)
Arab/Arab British	1 (9%)	-	-	3 (25%)	-	4 (7%)
Mixed Ethnicity	-	-	2 (20%)	-	1 (9%)	3 (5%)
Other	-	2 (17%)	4 (40%)	2 (17%)	-	8 (14%)
Missing	3 (25%)	-	1 (10%)	1 (9%)	4 (33%)	9 (16%)
FSM – N (%)						
Eligible	4 (33%)	8 (66%)	3 (30%)	-	7 (58%)	22 (38%)
Not eligible	8 (66%)	4 (33%)	7 (70%)	-	4 (33%)	23 (40%)
Missing	-	-	-	12 (100%)	1 (9%)	13 (22%)
Predicted grades at GCSE – N (%)						
Less than five 4-9s	8 (66%)	5 (42%)	9 (90%)	-	-	22 (38%)
Five or more 4-9s	4 (33%)	4 (33%)	1 (10%)	-	-	9 (16%)
Missing	-	3 (25%)	-	12 (100%)	12 (100%)	27 (47%)
Exclusion (internal or external) – N (%)						
Ever excluded	7 (58%)	3 (25%)	8 (80%)	-	-	18 (31%)
Never excluded	5 (42%)	1 (9%)	2 (20%)	-	9 (75%)	17 (29%)
Missing	-	8 (66%)	-	12 (100%)	3 (25%)	23 (40%)

RQ 1: To what extent was Career Ahead successfully implemented, for whom, under what circumstances and why?

Contribution Claim

- *There is strong evidence that the implementation of Career Ahead varied by implementation outcome (O[2]). YCLs formed strong relationships with participants and offered relevant and helpful advice and support. However, both the group sessions and work experience received mixed feedback from students and YCLs, exposure to the intervention was less than intended, and difficulties getting recruiting students most likely to benefit persisted.*
- *There is strong evidence that the implementation support provided by the HoD, including training and coaching (MResO), made an important contribution to the implementation successes observed by supporting the development of YCLs' competencies (MResP). So did the improvements to the intervention that were co-designed with YCLs, the HoD and the HoEP prior to Cohort 2, which included improvements to recruitment processes, training and coaching for YCLs, communication with schools and the design of group sessions .*
- *The extent to which this environment enabled implementation was influenced by the strength and quality of school and corporate partnerships and the challenges posed by COVID-19 (Context).*

The findings related to this research question are structured as follows:

- First, the findings related to the 'recruitment' sub-theory are shared (sub-theory 1).
- Then, the findings related to the 'high quality delivery' sub-theory are shared (sub-theory 4)[3].

For the 'high quality delivery' sub-theory:

[2] See figure 2 on page 21 for further detail on the components of each sub-theory.

[3] As previously reported, *due to prioritisation of evaluation resources, data was not collected on sub-theories 2 (school partnerships) and 3 (corporate partnerships), as these were incorporated as contextual factors within sub-theory 4 (high-quality delivery).*

- First, findings related to the mechanism resource are shared. These concern the strength of implementation support from MtL's HoD.
- This is followed by a description of the findings concerning YCL competencies (the mechanism response).
- Finally, the findings regarding the contribution of these competencies to each aspect of delivery are shared (the outcome), alongside a consideration of the role of school context and the corporate partner context.

The programme modifications made in advance of Cohort 2 are described at the start of the findings related to the corresponding aspect of implementation.

Recruitment (sub-theory 1)

The findings in this section concern the following sub-theory.

Sub-theory 1. Recruitment: If *the HoEP provides school leads with a clear understanding of Career Ahead and the target population (young people who would benefit from strengthening their non-cognitive skills to reduce their risk of NEET) and gives them time and space to discuss with others and ask questions (**MResO**),* ***then*** *young people selected to participate in the programme will be those most likely to benefit (**O**).* ***This is because*** *school staff will be able to align the profile of students sought by Career Ahead with their existing knowledge of their students (**MResP**).* ***This will depend on*** *whether school staff already know enough about young people's strengths and challenges and are able to prioritise the recruitment process (**C**).*

Following learning from Cohort 1, the recruitment process for Cohort 2 was redesigned around two activities. First, an initial meeting was introduced between the HoEP, the school lead, and the YCL at each school. This meeting helped refine the participant selection process by considering both data on risk factors (like eligibility for free school meals and predicted grades) and the school lead's insights, to support a balanced group composition. The second change was a 'taster' session before the main programme, where prospective participants joined a relaxed introductory session led by the YCL. The aim of this was to allow the YCL to assess suitability and give students the opportunity to determine whether Career Ahead aligned with their needs and preferences.

Evidence on the success of these measures – whether they supported Career Ahead to reach those students most likely to benefit – was mixed. According to referral data, while more young people had been excluded from school in Cohort 2 (51% vs 35% for Cohort 1), the same share were

predicted less than five 4-9s (70%) and fewer were eligible for free school meals (51% vs 63%). However, there were large amounts of missing data during both cohorts regarding referrals. Furthermore, these data are approximations for only some of the drivers of NEET status among young people, which are many and varied. Therefore, this comparison should be treated with caution.

The evidence based on the views shared by the HoEP, the YCLs and school leads was stronger. They felt that all students presented with more issues regarding non-cognitive skills and lacked alternative means of support during Cohort 2.

YCL at Pine: *"They found the right types of students this time around in terms of who didn't really have a lot of support."*

Yet challenges were still experienced with the recruitment process. Some young people were deemed generally 'at risk' by schools (not just related to NEET status – for example, there were fears about their involvement in anti-social behaviour), and therefore the YCLs were seen as an extra helping hand in some cases.

School lead at Pine: *"Any support we can get is really welcome... we cannot get around to... a lot of the children"*

Some were at risk of NEET but did not lack non-cognitive skills. Others lacked these skills but were not at risk of NEET, according to school leads. This suggested a misunderstanding of the target population.

School lead at Ash: *"I didn't even know who he really was, that's why I put him there... he already seemed sorted... he knew what he was going to do next."*

School lead at Beech: *"It's about kids who are academically strong but are struggling in other ways."*

Career Ahead participants should have been (i) at risk of NEET (ii) because they needed support with non- cognitive skill development. If these criteria were not met, this increased the risk that students would not benefit from Career Ahead. While YCLs felt most students did benefit during Cohort 2, some did not match these criteria, which led YCLs to question the extent to which they benefited.

YCL at Elm: *"Would I say that she really needed the programme? I'd say probably not."*

Case Study 1: Mia

- According to her YCL, "at the beginning of the year… she's quiet as a mouse. Absolutely zero confidence… she had been through a lot of bullying."
- Her school put her forward for Career Ahead "because she needed that support."
- Mia "was, like, really confused" about Career Ahead and what it was for, but suspected she was referred because "I wasn't confident enough and I couldn't, like, speak to other people". Regardless, she "just joined" anyway.

Case Study 2: Stefan

- Stefan's YCL felt he *"was not a child without support… he's got quite a tight-knit family".*
- But his school referred him for Career Ahead because of *"a lack of confidence"* and *"poor interpersonal skills… part of his difficulty was he couldn't make positive relations."*
- Stefan agreed to take part because the school *"told us that we'd get helped out a lot".*

Case Study 3: Jordan

- Jordan's school suggested he take part in Career Ahead *"because academically he wasn't doing very well. Behavioural, it was really bad. Emotionally he was in a place where he just didn't have an outlet… And so all of them together just created this… this very confused and loud individual who had no clue what they wanted to do with their life".*
- At the start of year 11, Jordan felt GCSEs were *"the last shot… I was nervous, I was overwhelmed. It was nerve wracking."*

Figure 6: Case studies for three, Cohort 2 students who participated in Career Ahead, with the focus on their experience of programme recruitment

High quality delivery (sub-theory 4)

The findings in this section concern the following sub-theory.

***Sub-theory 4. High quality delivery**: **If** (YCLs) receive high quality implementation support, including initial training and ongoing coaching (**MResO**), **then** Career Ahead's activities will be successfully implemented with fidelity. (**O**). **This is because** YCLs will acquire the necessary skills to deliver the programme as intended (**MResP**). **This will depend on** whether YCLs are sufficiently capable and motivated when they join MtL and whether schools and employers support implementation (**C**).*

Implementation support (mechanism resource)

During Cohort 1, the YCLs identified the weekly, all-day training they received from the HoD was the biggest driver of their development. These sessions were fun and interactive, allowing them to experiment with real-life delivery challenges in a low-risk environment.

> YCL at Elm: *"I'm someone who learns by doing. It was helpful for me to just come in, see the modules delivered and then deliver them to [other YCLs]."*

During delivery with Cohort 2, training was reduced to monthly sessions (as originally planned) alongside ad-hoc individual calls and no observation, reflecting YCLs' development following a year of implementation. The focus moved from intensive training to issue-specific advice. Following the second round of programme improvement (August 2022), prior to the start of Cohort 2, this included greater support for YCLs on dealing with safeguarding concerns, including a list of organisations and resources they could refer students to for extra support. There is some evidence from YCLs that they benefited from the modifications, particularly the provision of resources regarding additional support.

> YCL at Elm: *"[The HoD] sent us quite an extensive document with like different websites that we can send our students to... So things like that were really, really key."*

While the HoD did define YCL competencies prior to Cohort 1, these were not used with YCLs to support their development during Cohort 2. Nonetheless, YCLs felt that, alongside one year of experience, the tailored advice and support from MtL leadership helped YCLs to grow and develop against these competencies during cohort.

> YCL at Beech and Hazel: *"It's a bit of both... advice from [the HoD] and [the HoEP], and also just the time you have with the students... you just get more comfortable."*

YCL competencies (mechanism response)

40 out of 58 students in Cohort 2 (69%) completed the Mentoring Functions Questionnaire (MFQ) at the end of year 11. They were asked how much YCLs had helped them to develop their career goals, provided social support and acted as role models. The maximum score was 5 (a "strongly agree" response to all 9 statements[4]). The average score in each school ranged between 4.27 and 4.5, with all young people responding with either "high" or "medium" average scores (see figure 5).

[4] (1) My YCL takes a personal interest in my career; (2) My YCL helps me coordinate my goals; (3) My YCL has devoted special time and consideration to my career; (4) I share personal problems with my YCL; (5) I tell my YCL things I don't tell other people; (6) I consider my YCL to be a friend; (7) I try to model my behaviour after my YCL.; (8) I admire my YCL's ability to motivate others; (9) I think my YCL is good at teaching others

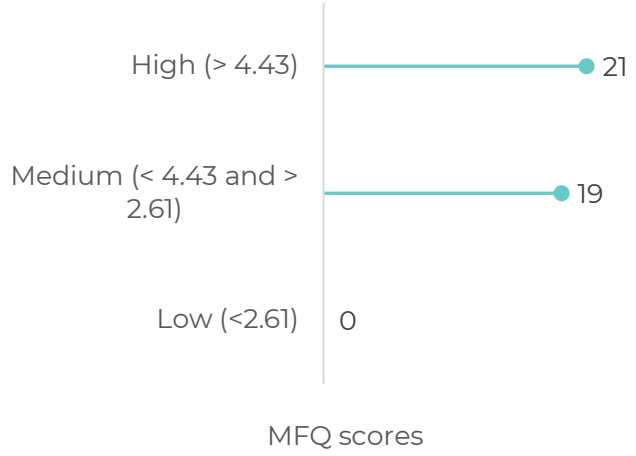

Figure 7: Average mentoring function questionnaire (MFQ) scores for the YCLs completed at the end of year 11 (August 2023) by Cohort 2 students

Overall, the evidence from YCLs' appraisals reinforced the positive results from the MFQ-9. Table 8 shows the performance ratings[5] given by the HoD for each YCL at the end of Cohort 2's year 11 (August 2023). Most YCLs were deemed to be at an expert level for most competencies, except for YCL 2.

[5] The assessment uses the following scale: (1) Basic awareness – common knowledge or an understanding of basic techniques and concepts; (2) Beginner – level of experience of a trainee on-the-job, expected to need help when performing this skill; (3) Intermediate – while help from an expert may be required from time to time, skill can usually be performed independently; (4) Advanced – can perform the actions associated with this skill without assistance; (5) Expert – can provide guidance, troubleshoot and answer questions related to this area of expertise. The scale is drawn from the US-based National Institute for Health's (NIH) five-point proficiency scale (NIH, 2024).

Competency	YCL 1	YCL 2	YCL 3	YCL 4
Connecting	Expert	Advanced	Expert	Expert
Group skills	Expert	Advanced	Expert	Expert
Emotional intelligence	Expert	Expert	Expert	Expert
Following core guidance	Advanced	Intermediate	Expert	Expert
Careers knowledge	Expert	Basic awareness	Expert	Expert
Organisational skills	Intermediate	Beginner	Expert	Expert

Table 8: Performance ratings given by the HoD for each YCL at the end of Cohort 2's year 11 (August 2023)

Evidence from interviews with students in Cohort 2 further strengthened these positive findings. Students told us that:

- If they didn't have YCL 3, "*I would still be all over the place*."
- YCL 1 "*showed me my potential*."
- YCL 4 taught them "*if I fail it's okay, because life is about failing and getting up again*."
- With YCL 2, "*the stuff that my dad hasn't taught me, like... they've taught me*."

Case Study 1: Mia

- Mia felt her YCL was interested in her as a person. They cared about her personal issues and provided tailored advice on her career trajectory: ***"With them it's not like I… I need to just talk about career and like, school… they've supported me with like, college and stuff as well… we applied for like, sixth forms… They were asking me what I wanted to be and stuff, so I told them that I wanted to be… and they looked into the sectors I can go into."***

Case Study 2: Stefan

- Stefan felt his YCL was ***"actually, like, a very good mentor… they actually, like… helped me out a lot."***
- This was partly because of the empathy their YCL demonstrated: they were ***"someone that you know you can always talk to."***
- They were also able to offer practical and personal careers advice: ***"they've helped me a lot by finding a lot of market research… there's a lot of courses out there."***

Case Study 3: Jordan

- Jordan liked his YCL. He felt they understood each other: ***"they understand me… they get me. They've been there… so they will tell me their point of view and I will understand where they're coming from."***

Figure 8: Case studies for three, Cohort 2 students who participated in Career Ahead, with the focus on their relationship with their YCL

High quality delivery (outcome)

Group sessions

During the second round of programme improvement (August 2022), prior to the start of Cohort 2, the evaluation team and MtL designed an adaptation to the student recruitment phase: during in-person discussions around recruitment, the HoEP and the YCLs would make time to explain what they needed to deliver the programme to a high-standard and why, and clarify any questions schools might have, to ensure better collaboration. Alongside their increased confidence, this enabled YCLs to advocate for the support they needed, including being formalised in students' timetables and having an appropriate room to work in.

> YCL at Pine: *"Sessions went really, really well this year, because I felt like I had everything that I needed to make sure that I could deliver in the most effective way."*

Despite this, only five out of 58 (9%) young people received the target of 10 out of 12 modules. The average number of sessions attended was 6.6 (see figure 9). There is some evidence from YCLs, and

the HoD that this was due to issues with school and tube strikes, student retention and attendance, which are explored in turn below.

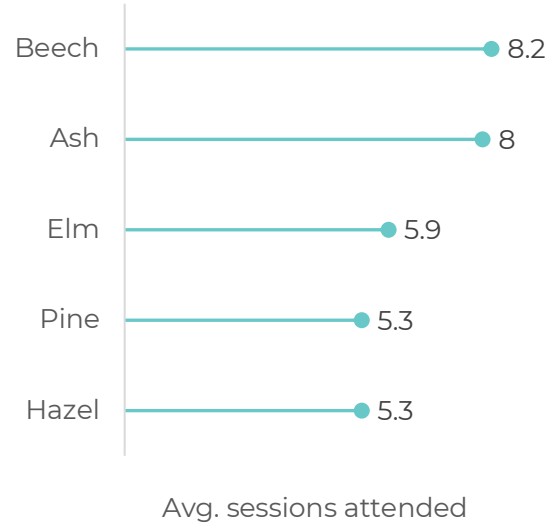

Figure 9: Average number of group sessions attended by students in Cohort 2 at the end of year 11 (August 2023) in each school

School and tube strikes

No school completed all 12 modules. Only Forest reached module 11. This was largely due to school and tube strikes that prevented YCLs from hosting sessions as planned.

> HoD: *"We followed the timeline... The only anomalies really have been strikes... the strikes have thrown a huge obstacle."*

Retention

Regardless of the number of group sessions held, students who joined late or left before completing the full course could not attend all sessions. This was particularly an issue at Pine, where three students left the school in early 2023. Their replacements received intensive mentoring to catch up, but both the departing students and their replacements had limited access to the full set of sessions (see figure 10).

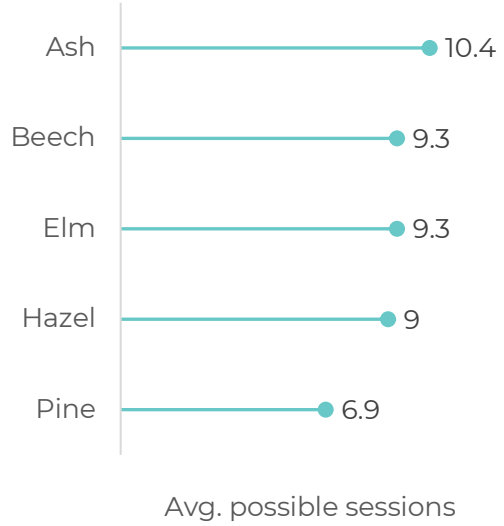

Figure 10: Average number of group sessions a student in Cohort 2 could have attended while active on the programme by the end of year 11 (August 2023) in each school

Attendance

Young people had to reach 85% attendance for the group sessions to be on track to receive 10 out of 12 modules. Only Beech reached this level on average (see figure 11).

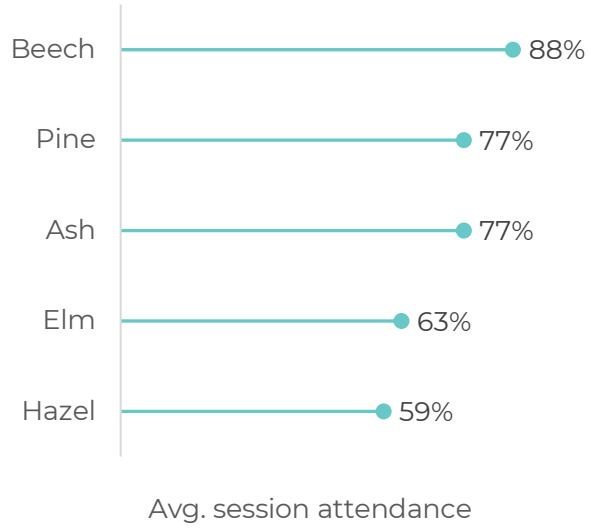

Figure 11: Average percentage of possible group sessions attended by students in Cohort 2 at the end of year 11 (August 2023) in each school

Sessions had to be held after school at Elm, which negatively impacted attendance. At Hazel, poor exam results the previous year left school leadership reluctant to let young people out of class to attend.

YCL at Hazel: *"They didn't do too great in their GCSEs last year. So at the turn of the year, the school... sort of like knuckled down on the kids coming out of lessons."*

Why did students like group sessions?

A minority of the students we interviewed said the group sessions were their favourite activity. Most students preferred group sessions when they offered clear, tangible and immediately useful benefits for them.

Student: *"I really, really enjoy group sessions. It's really fun and we do things to help us with applications for, like, sixth form, CVs."*

Others felt the groups helped them to develop social skills, learn from peers and engage with new ideas in a low-risk environment.

Student: *"A lot of us in the group were not confident enough to, like, go up and speak about stuff. So group sessions help to, like, build that kind of confidence."*

Why did students dislike group sessions?

Some felt the sessions were not interactive enough.

Student: *"[The YCL] would read and... like nobody really cared about the presentation, they just did their own stuff like, in their phone."*

For some YCLs, these less interactive sessions were often the those in which the content was more structured.

YCL at Ash: *"I like having a plan... which has a lot of leeway, because it gives freedom for things to happen and then we can adjust... they're the ones that for me went down the best."*

Some young people felt the presence of others limited the relevance to them.

Student: *"I'm not really learning anything. It's like you're just teaching other... like, you're teaching other people with different aspirations to me."*

Others were frustrated by the lack of engagement by others in the group.

Student: *"They're all right... No, they're not all right. Some people there, they're just there just because their friend is there."*

Others felt the groups were not psychologically safe.

Student: *"When I talk, some people laugh."*

Case Study 1: Mia

- Mia appreciated how practical, useful and relevant the group sessions were: *"we did one where we have to like, create our CVs… And then… we had to write stuff about our job interview… it was helpful, you can use it in the future."*
- But while Mia felt the sessions were *"helpful sometimes,"* other sessions were *"just not that helpful,"* for her or her group. In some sessions, she felt *"the presentation itself… I think it was boring, that's why they didn't pay any attention."*

Case Study 2: Stefan

- Stefan particularly enjoyed the modules focused on communication: *"Those are actually quite helpful… trying to see what's your, like, emotional language. So it's, like... I basically said… "how can I help you?" So, like, I'm saying it polite."*

Case Study 3: Jordan

- Jordan felt the group offered him a sense of community and shared experience: *"We're all there for a reason… I'm not the only one, so everyone else that's there, we all have something in common why we're there."*
- They also challenged him and exposed him to new ways of thinking: *"everyone has a say, so they'll give us a question… and I will answer that question and I'll hear someone else's point of view of the question."*

Figure 12: Case studies for three, Cohort 2 students who participated in Career Ahead, with the focus on their experiences of group sessions

Mentoring

Young people had received 7.1 mentoring sessions on average by August 2023, with large differences recorded between schools (see figure 13). Students at Elm and Pine received more sessions - 10.5 and 10.3 sessions on average – while those at Hazel, Ash and Beech received 6.8, 5.3 and 3.3 respectively.

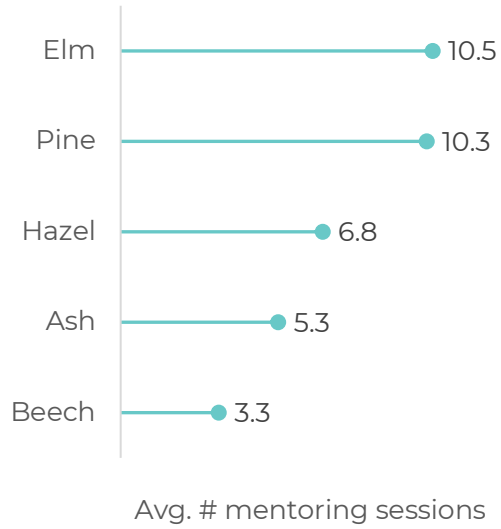

Figure 13: Average number of mentoring sessions attended by students in Cohort 2 at the end of year 11 (August 2023) in each school

At Elm, the YCL focused intensively on mentoring, including delivering sessions in advance of the first group session. At Pine, the school provided a private and well-lit room for the YCL and embedded mentoring in students' timetables, making it easier to organise.

> YCL at Pine: *"We had like a proper schedule. I knew who I was going to see at what time, what class they were going to be in... the teacher also expected them to be leaving as well. So it was very well done."*

Why did students like mentoring?

Most of the students we interviewed in Cohort 2 said mentoring was their favourite activity. As with Cohort 1, the YCLs all felt that mentoring made the biggest contribution to students' growth. For most of the students we interviewed in Cohort 2, the benefits they saw from mentoring were grounded in the trusting relationship they'd developed with their YCL. Trust was developed over time, through listening, being relatable and showing empathy.

> Student: *"If you didn't really trust the person you're speaking to it's, like, what's the whole point? You're not going to be honest... you ask them a question, they'll go into depth about it. And it just makes you like them more... and actually see they're there to help you."*

> Student: *"He's had life experiences, yeah… they can really relate to, like, stuff that I don't tell my mum."*

Student: *"There's other people... like, teachers... they just want to know your business straight away. And they don't give you time, and [my YCL] does give time."*

This trust enabled them able to open up about personal challenges that few other people in their lives were aware of. This allowed them to feel like all the different parts of them were acknowledged and appreciated. For some young people, this was rare, which led them to engage more.

School staff at Pine: *"They just need individual attention... just somebody... listening to them for half an hour, I think it really makes a difference."*

Student: *"Knowing that someone is rooting for you makes you feel so much more better... if they're not, you feel like you're alone."*

Student: *"When I want to tell someone something, to have someone to tell, like, it just takes a real... like, it's just a weight off my back."*

This foundation of trust also enabled them to share and receive support on practical issues that were important to them.

Student: *"Yeah, about my college, because that's quite an important thing that... I probably wouldn't have asked any teacher about it... she's been able to help me with that and... help me organise myself in terms of like, when to revise and... she's been able to push me to deal with that."*

Case Study 1: Mia

- Mia felt mentoring offered her a safe space to talk about sensitive, personal problems: *"When it's like, mentoring sessions, just one-to-one, I can just talk about like, anything in life and they can support me"*
- This foundation of trust enabled her to *"get advice"* on the things that mattered to her. Her YCL offered *"a support to solve more problems."*
- Her school agreed: *"She really gets on with [her YCL], she takes all of their advice."*

Case Study 2: Stefan

- Stefan enjoyed the privacy of mentoring: *"You can actually speak to them quite more... you're not trying to let... other people know your business."*
- He felt his YCL was able to use mentoring to offer tools and ways of learning that were fun and worked for him: *"[My YCL] actually motivates me for doing new, creative stuff, finding new ways how to revise."*

Case Study 3: Jordan

- For Jordan, mentoring offered freedom: *"One-to-one can get personal, so I'm free to say what I want, how I want to say it."*
- He appreciated it when his YCL used lessons from his own life when offering advice: *"[My YCL] told me their experience… what I should and shouldn't do, what I could do next time".*
- His school felt mentoring gave him *"that person and that space… giving him the chance to unravel all the confusion in his head."*

Figure 14: Case studies for three Cohort 2 students who participated in Career Ahead, with the focus on their experiences of mentoring sessions

Work experience

The intention for Career Ahead was that MtL would build on their existing relationships with multiple work experience partners to tailor work experience opportunities to students. The increase in home-working associated with COVID-19 meant this did not happen, as there were fewer prospective partners able to host and supervise students on their premises. Instead, work experience was provided by one partner during both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2, a large international outsourcing and professional services company with offices in Central London (henceforth "corporate partner").

Three out of five Cohort 2 groups completed work experience. At Beech and Hazel (both allocated to the same YCL), the school wanted students to focus on revision instead.

> YCL at Beech and Hazel: *"When it started to get exam season, that's when access was limited - "No, sorry… that half term might not be able to work because we need to get them in the half term to do the extra booster classes."*

The corporate partner was unable to host them later in the year. Capacity issues at the corporate partner also delayed work experience at Pine and Elm (see figure 15).

HoD: "They just didn't have the staff to deliver it... Whether it's a tube strike or a school strike, and then also... I think they get a bit scared by having 10 of them come in... I can't see it getting any better... Just because there is a new normal in the office now... there's no one there."

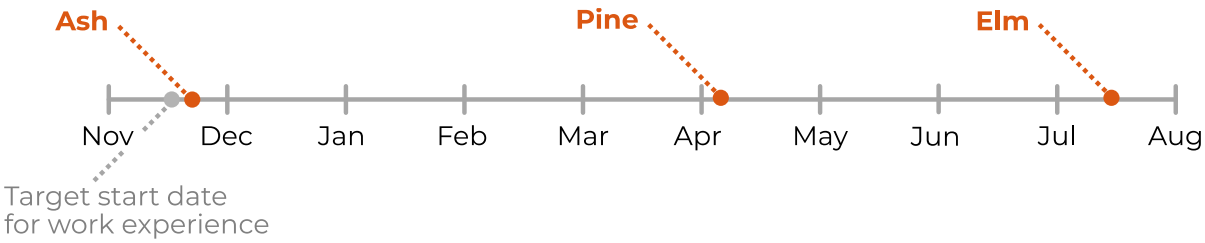

Figure 15: Timeline of target start date for work experience (grey) compared to actual start date of work experience for three of the schools (orange)

Why did students like work experience?

At the time of interview, only Ash had attended work experience. 1 out of 3 of the students interviewed said work experience was their favourite activity. This student felt they gained resources and relationships that would be useful to them in the future.

Student: *"Some of them know me, which will be good for me, like, if I try to work in that company I think it's pretty useful I still have the notebook, there's lots of information I can look back to... it could help me."*

Others felt buoyed by rising to the challenge of speaking in front of people during the presentation, which each of them had prepared for since the start of the week by focusing on a topic related to the employer.

Student: *"It was really nerve-wracking, but I still managed to get up and do it."*

For others, it exposed them to new experiences and ideas that helped to broaden their understanding of what was possible for them.

Student: *"I had a really good time, and I visited a new building, I learnt a lot."*

YCL at Pine: *"It gave them a greater insight to what life could be like and actually they do belong in spaces that look like this."*

Why did students dislike work experience?

All three YCLs at Ash, Pine and Elm felt that work experience could have been more interactive:

YCL at Ash: "I just think they need to actually be working on real, practical examples."

RQ 2: How did implementation contribute to any reported changes in students' non-cognitive skills, for whom, under what circumstances, and why?

Contribution Claim

- *The change in non-cognitive skills observed through the WorkLinks Skills & Values Assessment Tool showed a slight decrease from pre- to post-intervention, but the difference was small and not statistically significant ($p = 0.16$). The small sample size likely contributed to the lack of statistical significance, and wider confidence intervals indicate uncertainty about the impact of the intervention on non cognitive skills. Nonetheless, there is strong evidence that Career Ahead made an important contribution to the non-cognitive skills of some students (MResO). It did so by facilitating their engagement in development cycles, whereby YCLs helped students to identify and pursue goals and overcome obstacles along the way (MResP).*
- *Whether and how students engaged in these cycles and benefited from Career Ahead depended on wider influences in their lives (Context). This included their personal history, experiences, and capabilities as well as the strength of their support networks outside of Career Ahead. Some students already had sufficient support and did not need Career Ahead. Others with higher levels of need required more support at an earlier stage than Career Ahead could offer. Those who benefited had high-to-moderate levels of need. They engaged with YCLs because they lacked other sources of support.*

The findings related to this research question are structured as follows:

- First, the findings on the contribution of Career Ahead (the mechanism resource) to non-cognitive skill development are outlined, by examining the ways in which YCLs supported students through development cycles (the mechanism response).
- Then, the findings related to changes in non-cognitive skills are shared (the WLSVA results) – the outcome of this sub-theory.
- Finally, findings regarding the role of wider influences (context) in mediating engagement in development cycles are described.

Development cycles (mechanism response)

Implementation challenges were present in both cohorts 1 and 2. Feedback on the group sessions and work experience was mixed from both students and YCLs, participant exposure to the intervention was lower than planned, and recruiting students most likely to benefit remained difficult. These factors reduced participants' opportunities to fully benefit from Career Ahead.

Nonetheless, strong, triangulated evidence from interviews with students, school staff, YCLs and the HoD suggested that some students did benefit. Those that benefited most from Career Ahead's group work, mentoring and work experience activities often did so because they engaged in development cycles. These are three- stage cycles of growth, in which young people were supported by their YCL to (1) identify and (2) pursue goals while (3) overcoming obstacles.

1. Identifying goals

For most students, the trusting relationship with their YCL formed the foundation for their engagement in development cycles. The more they opened up, the more they felt seen, heard and valued and the more they started to value themselves and their future. This motivated them to set goals and work in their best interest.

> Student*: "I'm, like, right, if he wants me to do good, I want to do good as well."*

Being explicit about what they wanted and committing to pursuing it was often the hardest part. It exposed them to the risk of failure.

> YCL at Elm: *"I said it to her once, "I know you're scared of failing, and that's why you don't try." And she instantly looked down and got really teary. And then she was like, you know, "It's true. Like I've missed so much school, I don't think I could ever catch up."*

2. Pursuing goals

To make long-term goals less daunting, YCLs often focused on making the beginning of the journey more manageable.

> YCL at Ash: *"It's like they're scared to start. Or they're like they don't know how to start… So it's like, this is how you can begin."* YCL at Ash

Sometimes this involved creating smaller goals that were easier to tackle. Other times, YCLs would focus on helping young people feel better about themselves first, and then tackle career-related goals later.

> YCL at Pine: *"I've had so many teachers come up to me and say… "he's just a much more positive child"… once we kind of tackled that, we were able to really go for the career stuff."*

YCLs often combined different activities to reinforce young people's pursuit of goals. While mentoring offered a chance to internalise lessons from the group sessions and work experience, the latter provided more challenging situations in which to practice ideas and skills discussed in the former.

YCL at Ash: *"I guess it was a mix… in our one to ones being like… "all right look… there's going to be points in the group sessions where… I'm going to push you to take the lead." So it's like… she knew it was coming."*

Observing their growth often motivated young people to set more stretching goals.

Student: *"I was expecting a five, fours maybe in the start of the year, but then, the more I'm going through the journey, I wanted to get higher grades… so, I concentrated more on lessons. I did more revising at home."*

3. Overcoming obstacles

YCLs remained flexible and ready to respond to unforeseen obstacles to maintain young people's motivation. These were often personal issues, so YCLs consistently made room for them in mentoring.

Student: *"I'd say what he does particularly well, motivation… with the teachers it's, like, it's only about work, but with him he asks you how you are actually feeling as well. So that's what makes you trust him."*

Case Study 1: Mia ▲

- Social anxiety was the main issue for Mia: ***"I can't really talk to other people like, normally… it's blocking in some way… in school, like I'm just alone sitting in the corner and everyone is just talking and helping each other, and I'm just, like, outside of that."***
- According to her YCL, ***"she's been able to break things down into little steps"*** in mentoring, which has helped her to manage her anxiety. Now, ***"she'll just go out for lunch and like you see her around the school and she looks happier."***

Case Study 2: Stefan ●

- Stefan's YCL helped him overcome obstacles, by helping him to reframe failure as opportunity: ***"If I fail in something… she tells me it's all right… the way that you learn is by failing first time…do it again, but with better results this time."***
- His YCL felt mentoring reinforced what Stefan learned in the group: ***"A lot of our module content… it was very beneficial for him, especially when we were able to go over it in the mentoring sessions… practising what we… what we've been talking about."***

Case Study 3: Jordan ■

- For Jordan, the fact that he related so closely to his YCL made his challenges seem less daun[illegible]g and his goals more achievable; someone like him had already walked the same path: ***"he's been through it… we're both black, so we both see school in a different way… so for him to tell me that school is a vital part of life, I was like, 'Okay then'… I learned that I'm not the only one that's doing this, it shows me I still have time to change and be a better person."***

Figure 16: Case studies for three, Cohort 2 students who participated in Career Ahead, with the focus on their experiences of overcoming obstacles

Changes in non-cognitive skills: WLSVA results (outcome)

Participants

A total of 58 participants were involved in Cohort 2 of Career Ahead. All 58 were part of the evaluation. Table 9 provides an overview of the number of participants with pre- and post-intervention data on the WLSVA. Overall, there were 53 participants (91%) who provided at least some form of WLSVA data, either at baseline or post-test. Missing data at baseline was driven by non-attendance on the day the assessment was being carried out. Missing data at follow-up was due to non-attendance at school, programme attrition (seven participants had left the programme) and other pressure on students' time concerning GCSE exams that limited their participation in the assessment session. These included mock exams and extra study sessions hosted by their school.

Data complete	Beech (n = 12)	Ash (n = 12)	Elm (n = 10)	Pine (n = 12)	Hazel (n = 12)	Total (n = 58)
Data on pre-WLSVA – N (%)	10 (83%)	11 (92%)	8 (80%)	7 (58%)	9 (75%)	45 (78%)
Data on post-WLSVA – N (%)	10 (83%)	9 (75%)	6 (60%)	8 (67%)	6 (50%)	39 (67%)
Any complete data – N (%)	12 (100%)	11 (92%)	9 (90%)	11 (92%)	10 (83%)	53 (91%)

Table 9. Number of participants with complete data at the end of year 11 in the five school sites and in total

There were 31 students (53% of all programme participants) with complete WLSVA data at pre- and post-intervention. Table 10 describes the demographic characteristics of participants with and without complete pre-and post-intervention WLSVA data. Based on the available data, some differences in the characteristics of the two groups are apparent. These include higher levels of missing data, fewer students eligible for FSM and fewer students predicted less than five 4-9s for participants without WLSVA data at pre- and post-intervention.

Demographics	Participants with WLSVA data at pre- and post-intervention (n = 31)	Participants without WLSVA data at pre- and post-intervention (n = 27)
Gender – N (%)		
Female	11 (35%)	8 (30%)
Male	19 (61%)	12 (44%)
Missing	1 (3%)	7 (26%)

Ethnicity – N (%)		
Black/Black British	14 (45%)	12 (44%)
White/White British	3 (10%)	1 (4%)
Asian / Asian British	2 (6%)	2 (7%)
Arab / Arab British	2 (6%)	2 (7%)
Mixed Ethnicity	2 (6%)	1 (4%)
Other	6 (19%)	2 (7%)
Missing	2 (6%)	7 (26%)
FSM – N (%)		
Eligible	14 (45%)	8 (30%)
Not eligible	12 (39%)	11 (41%)
Missing	5 (16%)	8 (30%)
Predicted GCSE grades – N (%)		
Less than five 4-9s	15 (48%)	7 (26%)
Five or more 4-9s	5 (16%)	4 (15%)
Missing	11 (35%)	16 (59%)
Exclusion (internal or external) – N (%)		
Ever excluded	9 (29%)	8 (30%)
Never excluded	11 (35%)	7 (26%)
Missing	11 (35%)	12 (44%)

Table 10. Demographic characteristics of participants with and without complete pre- and post-intervention SDQ data

Paired sample t-tests on WLSVA Soft Skills construct scores (table 11) show there was a slight decrease in soft skills scores from pre- to post-intervention, but this difference was small and not statistically significant. The negative effect size suggests a minor reduction in soft skills, but the wide confidence interval (which includes both negative and positive values, and which may have been exacerbated by the small sample size) indicates uncertainty about the true direction of the change. Given the p-value of 0.16, we cannot conclude that there was a significant change in participants' soft skills over the course of the programme.

WLSVA construct	N	Pre-intervention mean (SD)	Post-intervention mean (SD)	Mean difference (95% CIs)	Effect size†	t-score	p-value (two-tailed)^
Soft skills	31	88.55 (12.45)	85.79 (15.04)	-2.76 (-9.63 to 4.11)	-0.20	-1.44	0.16

^Significance was determined based on an alpha level of 0.05. †Cohen's D.

Table 11. Paired t-tests on WLSVA soft skills construct and subscale scores (n = 31)

Wider influences (context)

The degree to which, and the ways in which, students benefited from Career Ahead depended on wider influences. This included their personal history, experiences, and capabilities as well as the strength of their support networks outside of Career Ahead. There was no evidence that Career Ahead was harmful. However, some students already had sufficient support and did not need Career Ahead. Others required more support at an earlier stage than Career Ahead was able to offer. For others, triangulated evidence from interviews with students, school leads, the YCLs and the HoD provides strong evidence that whether and how Career Ahead supported them to engage in development cycles depended on their developmental trajectory, as captured in the WLSVA assessment, which was shaped by these wider influences.

According to the WLSVA, an increase in non-cognitive skills of +3.8% can be considered a meaningful improvement, a change of -3.8% to +3.8% constitutes no meaningful change, and a decrease of -3.8% constitutes a meaningful decrease (Dersham 2020). The number of students who improved, experienced no change or decreased is reported in table 12 below.

Change in non-cognitive skills according to the WLSVA	Number of students
Increase	9
No change	6
Decrease	16

Table 12: Number of students who experienced an improvement, no change or a deterioration in their non-cognitive skills according to the WLVSA.

For some of those who experienced an improvement, Career Ahead helped to support their growth. For some who experienced no change, Career Ahead helped them to maintain their level. For some of those who experienced a deterioration in their non-cognitive skills, Career Ahead helped to reduce the extent of this deterioration – in other words it helped to soften their fall. However, for those with particularly high levels of need or those with little need for additional support, Career Ahead offered little. This categorisation is explained in further detail below in figure 17.

Figure 17: How wider influences shaped the contribution of Career Ahead to non-cognitive skill development among students

RQ 3: How did students' non-cognitive skills contribute to any reported changes in EET outcomes, for whom, under what circumstances and why?

Contribution Claim

- *There is some evidence of variation in the degree to which students entered positive EET placements following the end of year 11 (i.e. those aligned with their goals) (O). There is some evidence that their levels of non-cognitive skills and, for some, the follow-on mentoring provided by Career Ahead, made an important contribution.*
- *However, follow-on mentoring experienced implementation challenges – it was not delivered at all in two schools – which limited its reach and impact (MResO). There is some evidence that non-cognitive skills and follow-on mentoring contributed by empowering students to take advantage of opportunities and protecting them from risks (MResP). Some of those with lower levels of non-cognitive skills at the end of year 11 did not get the placement they wanted, while others did not get a placement at all. For these students, follow-on mentoring was insufficient to help them move towards a more positive EET outcome.*
- *Other students were able to enter and maintain a positive EET outcome without the help of follow-on support, due to the strength of their wider networks and their high levels of non-cognitive skills. But for students with sufficient levels of non-cognitive skills who lacked wider support networks, follow-on mentoring helped them to stay on track (Context).*

Follow-on mentoring was a core component of the Career Ahead intervention. Starting from the end of year 11 and lasting for a further six months, it was designed to address the fact that the hypothesised relationship between non-cognitive skills and transitions into post-16 EET is complex (Ripamonti 2023) and students can face unforeseen challenges. Therefore, follow-on mentoring supported students by reinforcing the contribution of non-cognitive skills to students' ability to enter and remain in EET for at least six months.

The findings related to this research question are structured as follows:

- We begin by sharing the findings concerning the quality of delivery of follow-on mentoring (the mechanism resource).
- The findings related to the compounding effect of follow-on mentoring on non-cognitive skill development are then shared (the mechanism response).

- Finally, the findings regarding the contribution of non-cognitive skills and follow-on mentoring to EET outcomes are outlined (the outcome), alongside the findings concerning the role of wider influences in shaping this contribution (context).

Follow-on mentoring

Implementation (mechanism resource)

Follow-on mentoring was delivered between September and December 2023, finishing three months earlier than the intended March 2024 end date because YCLs were enrolled on other projects at MtL. During that period, 16 of the 51 (31%) students still enrolled at the end of year 11 received at least one session, including all students at Elm (see figure 18). Since follow-on mentoring was a new innovation for MtL, with several unknown elements, there was no set target for the number of sessions students should receive, making it difficult to establish a benchmark for delivery.

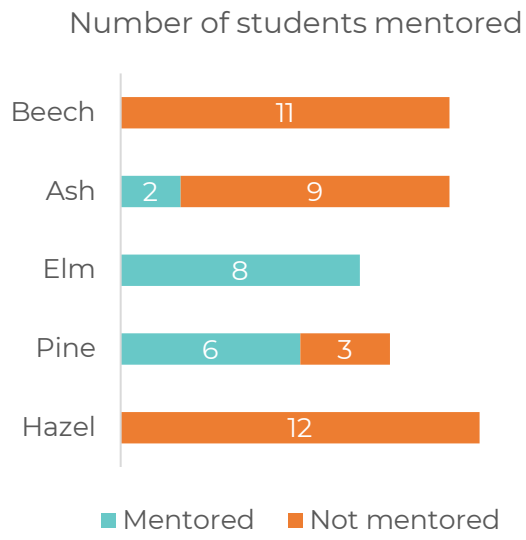

Figure 18: Number of Cohort 2 students who received follow-on mentoring between September and December 2023 in each school

The average number of sessions received by students varied between settings, with students at Elm receiving the most (3.9) (see figure 19).

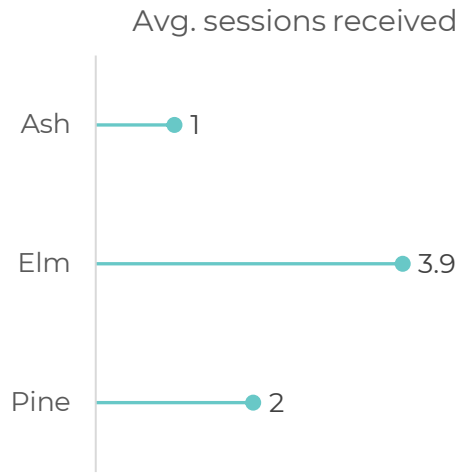

Figure 19: The average number of follow-on mentoring sessions received by Cohort 2 students across three school sites

Difficulties engaging students

Each YCL at Ash, Elm and Pine was only able to hold one or two in-person sessions in total. There is some evidence from YCLs and students that this was largely due to logistical problems.

> Student: *"I would want to meet up but I would be too busy or there are times where they're working."*

> YCL at Elm: *"It would be impossible to go and meet them… It would just mean that we dotted around London, which doesn't really make a lot of sense."* YCL at Elm

Instead, almost all mentoring occurred remotely via phone calls and messages, but this brought its own challenges. YCLs felt the lack of consistent, in-person interaction impacted the strength of their connections with students overall.

> YCL at Ash: *"They got a bit like "out of sight, out of mind."*

It also placed greater burden on students' capacity to engage.

> YCL at Elm: *"It didn't pan out as expected… it was really tricky in some respects… when you're in their school every week, you're unavoidable… But then… you're asking them to give up their personal time."*

Arranging mentoring remotely also had logistical challenges. During the third round of design improvements in October 2023, which focused on follow-on mentoring, one modification to Cohort 1 included instituting a day to contact all students, but this proved impossible.

YCL at Pine: *"Everyone was at different colleges. And everyone's got different frees and different free times, you know."*

Pressure on the YCL role

The part-time nature of their jobs made it harder for YCLs to be flexible enough to match the variation in students' schedules. This was compounded by the fact that Career Ahead was coming to an end, and that YCLs were being enrolled onto other projects at MtL.

YCL at Ash: *"The biggest struggle… was just having time. That's mainly because this wasn't my only job. It got quite difficult to balance everything… But then it's also because I couldn't make this my only job because it's got a limited shelf-life."*

Student: *"Meeting up in person wasn't good… they weren't able to come… I could speak to them… once every three weeks… it wasn't enough… they take a really long time to reply."*

Pressure on the HoD

From September 2023, the HoD was covering for multiple vacant posts at MtL. That left them with little time to support YCLs. While they were able to provide support on request, they were unable to deliver structured training.

HoD: *"I would see them if we bumped into each other. We'd kind of say "How are things?" down the corridor... but they know that I'm hands on and I'm there if they need me."*

The HoD and some YCLs felt that YCLs would have benefited from some considered support on mentoring, given their inexperience.

YCL at Elm: *"I would have found it more useful if we had a bit more formal training… Particularly because we're not trained… we don't have previous experience doing these roles."*

Learning and improvement at Pine and Elm

Through trial and error, the YCLs at Pine and Elm found the best format for delivery for follow-on mentoring was casual and WhatsApp-based. They made it clear that they were available if needed by sending messages in group chats with students to say as much. Those that needed support would then message the YCL directly. Sometimes the support could be delivered via message or email. Other times, it led to a short phone call.

YCL at Pine: *"A lot of them would use WhatsApp as a way to message me… And then we might have a quick little phone call, where I tell them some of the changes that they should make, for example, on their CV. It was a lot more casual."*

YCL at Elm: *"Less formal check ins… the odd email, the odd message, that works super well… just trying to keep it as light touch and casual and time efficient as possible, is definitely something that I would say is key."*

How did follow-mentoring contribute to EET outcomes? (mechanism response)

The constraints on delivery shaped how students benefited from follow-on mentoring. Interactions were lighter touch - they were shorter, fewer, largely remote and predominantly message-based. This meant that: (i) mentoring focused more on helping students to pursue goals they had already set; (ii) delivery was student-led; and (iii) support was largely practical rather than emotional.

Pursuing goals and overcoming obstacles

The development cycles that YCLs facilitated with students to support their non-cognitive skills development constituted three stages: identifying goals, pursuing goals, and overcoming obstacles. There is some evidence from YCLS that during follow-on mentoring, there was little opportunity to work on stage one. Students came to YCLs with pre-set goals that they needed support with, either for advice or help with troubleshooting.

YCL at Ash: *"At this point where maybe, because I'm not seeing them regularly, there's no structure, it's… just more of a guidance at this point."*

YCLs felt that the contribution of this guidance to ongoing non-cognitive skill development was limited. Instead, follow-on mentoring supported students to make the most of their existing skills by helping them to stay on track.

YCL at Ash: *"It's not about soft skills now… it's not a thing of "lets work on confidence." It's like "what's happening in your week right now, what's happening in your college right now? And like, anything you might need to think about?"*

Being student-led

YCLs understood that students' positions had changed. They were no longer at school. Some were in part-time work or at college, with greater independence and responsibility for managing their schedules. There is some evidence from YCLs, students and the HoD that this transition could be difficult.

Student: *"It's good, but it's a little bit hard for me. Because I'm going from a secondary school to college. It just feels a little bit weird."*

By making room for students to control the pace, format and content of mentoring, YCLs prevented themselves from becoming a burden.

YCL at Pine: *"Whenever it would get quiet, I'd think… "let them settle in." Because we're understanding that, you know… they're just adjusting, and it's a transition period for them. So just letting them know that "hey, I'm here," without making it like, "we need to speak tomorrow at 2pm."*

For some students, seeing themselves as independent helped to give them the confidence that they could rise to the challenge of their post-16 placement. By letting students take the lead, YCLs reflected this new identity back to them, helping to reinforce and strengthen their resolve.

YCL at Pine: *"They're actually in college now. It's like, "you did it and you're grown" … so I feel like you've got to meet them with that energy."*

More practical support, less emotional support

YCLs felt that the lack of in-person delivery limited the amount of emotional support they could offer. They felt that face-to-face interaction created the necessary conditions for exploratory conversations, which were harder to establish remotely.

YCL at Pine: *"When you're face-to-face, that's when the other things come to the surface… like more of an open view, more of a full circle view of what's actually going on. As opposed to when it comes to what it's been for the last six months. It's been with a purpose… It's more like, we're trying to get things done and "how can I help with that?" as opposed to "let's just have a chat."*

The lack of in-person contacts also meant YCLs could not observe students. That reduced the amount of contextual information they could gather, whether through body language or interactions with peers, which limited their ability to pick up on and discuss emotional concerns.

YCL at Pine: *"If it was face-to-face, you can't really hide. On the phone you can kind of hide it a little bit if something's going on. For example if someone's just finished crying, you're not gonna know that they just finished crying if you're on the phone. Whilst if you do it in person, it's "Your eyes are red, your eyes are puffy, what's wrong? Why have you been crying?"*

EET outcomes

Strong evidence from interviews with students, school leads, YCLs and the HoD suggests that non-cognitive skills were important in driving positive EET outcomes – that is, a post-16 placement over which students have agency and which aligns with their goals. Students who had developed these non-cognitive skills sufficiently were equipped with the confidence and motivation to pursue their post-16 goals. They were empowered to take advantage of opportunities and protected from risks, including negative expectations from peers.

> *Student: "Before I didn't really want to talk to anyone I just wanted to stay by myself… I wanted to be acknowledged… it was like subconscious feeling, to need acknowledgement from other people that do not want to acknowledge you at all… That's changed for me. Because I see that if people don't care, I don't need to care. I can go my own way. I don't need somebody else for me to choose who I am… [my YCL] helped me out a lot with finding what I really wanted to do. Because if she wasn't there to actually help me find I would be doing construction also. Which I don't think I would like!"*

However, there were differences in the extent to which non-cognitive skills empowered students. YCLs felt that some students, regardless of whether Career Ahead contributed or not, did not have sufficient levels of non-cognitive skills at the end of year 11 to support their transition into a post-16 placement that aligned with their needs and preferences. YCLs and students reported that some did not get the placement they wanted while others did not get a placement at all. For these students, follow-on mentoring was insufficient to help them move towards a more positive EET outcome. Other students were able to enter and maintain a positive EET outcome without the help of follow-on support, due to the strength of their wider networks. But for other students – those who had sufficient levels of non-cognitive skills and lacked wider support networks – follow-on mentoring helped them to stay on track (see figure 20).

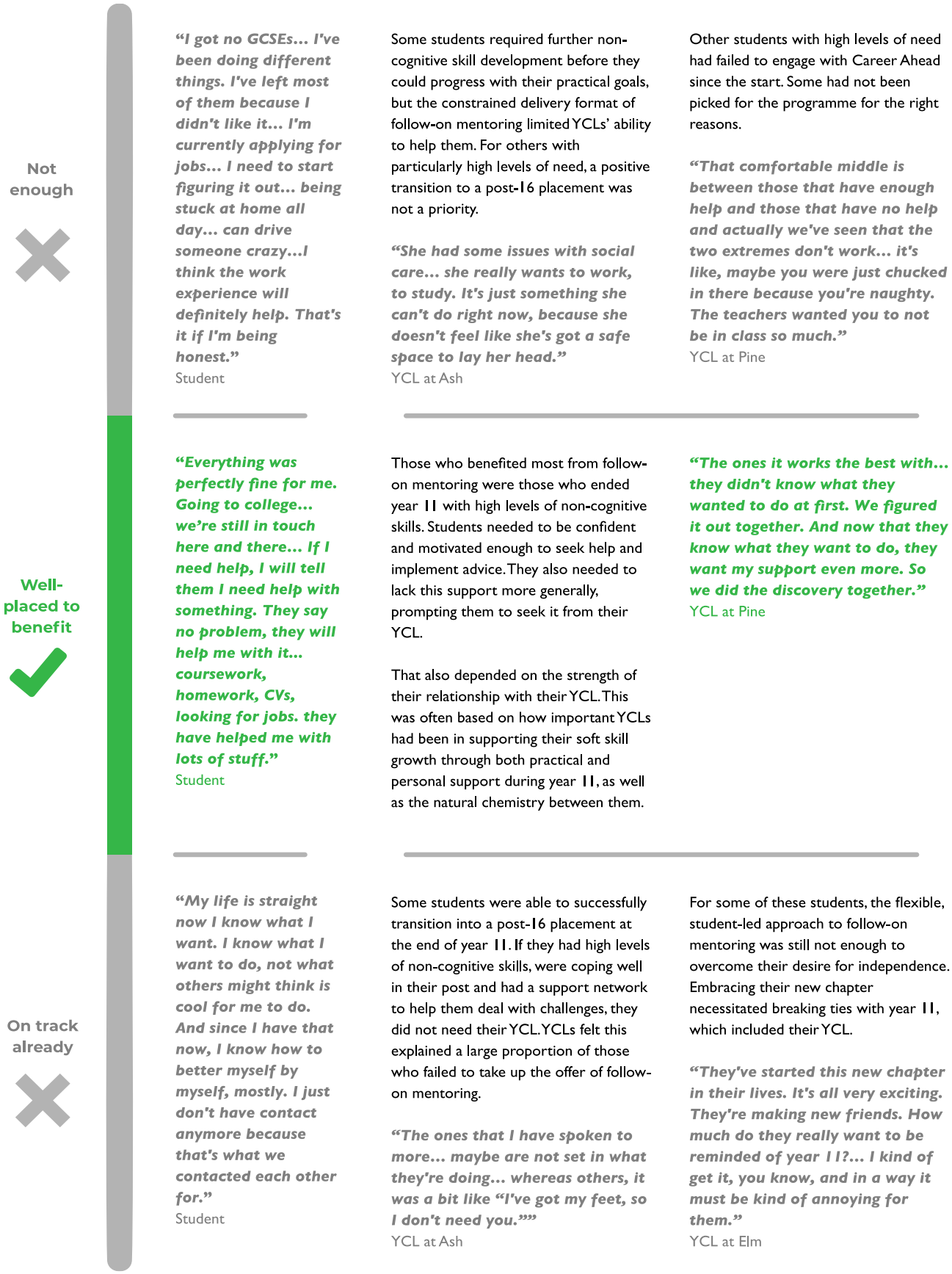

Figure 20: How wider influences shaped the contribution of follow-on mentoring to EET outcomes among students

RQ 4: How did implementation contribute to any reported unintended consequences, for whom, under what circumstances, and why?

- *There is some evidence that the lack of mentor-mentee matching between YCLs, and students contributed to limited engagement in the programme for some students. The YCL-student relationship drove students' engagement in development cycles. Where this relationship was weaker due to misaligned interests and personalities, engagement suffered.*
- *There is some evidence that negative labelling in groups temporarily impacted some students' engagement in Career Ahead. For both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2, the initial lack of clear messaging on why students were selected, and their perceptions of other group members led some students to believe that Career Ahead was for poorly behaved students or those with special educational needs. For students that did not associate with these identities, engagement suffered. Over time, through participation and the development of their relationship with their YCL, these impressions dissipated.*

As part of the evaluation, we sought to identify and explore possible unintended adverse effects. We were particularly alert to the impact of unmatched mentor-mentee relationships, mandatory participation and negative group labelling. These were prioritised based on the previous experiences of MtL from other projects and on the adverse effects encountered by researchers in evaluations of other group-based, targeted, positive youth development and mentoring interventions, particularly Evans et al. (2015). These formed columns on the framework matrix that was used to analyse qualitative data, with any evidence associated with these phenomena recorded against the matrix. We remained open to, and actively explored other possible issues during qualitative data collection, while also maintaining open channels of communication with MtL through regular meetings as a structure for raising any serious adverse effects that would have required immediate attention. However, none were observed.

The findings for this research question are structured based on the two sub-theories concerning unintended consequences: unmatched pairs and negative labelling. The findings related to each sub-theory are shared in turn.

Unmatched pairs

Mentoring is often more effective when mentors and mentees are matched based on shared interests (DuBois et al., 2011). The absence of a matching process between YCLs and students increased the risk that, while some YCL-student relationships would flourish, others would fail, limiting the degree to which these students might benefit from Career Ahead. Although this was

recognised as a risk before Cohort 1 began, the logistical challenges of matching YCLs to students made the process impractical to implement.

There is some evidence from interviews with YCLs that this risk was realised. YCLs naturally connected with some students more than others, which they felt had a significant impact on engagement in, and subsequent benefit from the programme.

> YCL at Elm: *"So much rides on your personal relationship with the student… And as you know, you don't have a blanket relationship with everybody."*

The multi-component nature of Career Ahead compounded this risk, particularly where difficult pre-existing relationships between students within the group led to splits or factions.

> YCL at Elm: *"There was a weird group dynamic where [the school lead] had selected three students who were in a sort of friendship group, and two of them had longstanding beef with each other. And I had a particularly good rapport with... one of them. And I feel like the other one just wouldn't allow herself to have a rapport with me as a result of that."*

Negative labelling

By explicitly identifying candidates for the programme based on whether they are deemed 'at risk', Career Ahead ran the risk of communicating to students that they were considered 'problematic' by school and society. This could inadvertently formalise and strengthen perceptions among participants that little is expected of them, limiting their motivation to engage in development cycles. This phenomenon has been observed in other UK-, school- and group-based targeted interventions (Evans, et al., 2015).

There was confusion regarding the purpose of Career Ahead among Cohort 1 students. While some understood it was a mentoring and group-based programme to help them with their careers, and that they had been selected because the school thought they were particularly well-placed to benefit, others were left to guess. The introduction of the taster session for the start of Cohort 2 was intended to address this issue as well as encourage clear, voluntary participation. While this helped students to understand the purpose of Career Ahead, it was not clear to a minority of those interviewed why they had been selected. This left them to guess based on who else was in the group. There is some evidence from students that where they reacted negatively to the shared characteristics they identified, this limited their engagement.

> Student: *"When I saw who was there, I thought I knew why. Because the people that were in there were all there for behaviour. Yeah, I was like, "Oh, we're in trouble."*

> Student: *"I thought it was something for children that have that special educational needs. So I'm like, "There's something that people are hiding from me," because I'm put in certain positions where I'm in… When I have my exams... they give me extra time or something… I do not need any of that. So… when they just put me in that, I'm like, "What are you really doing?"… there's something I don't know."*

In time, through participating, there is some evidence from interviews with students to suggest this perception among those whom it affected dissipated. These students grew to see how Career Ahead could benefit them, a particular concern given the pressures of year 11 and the looming prospect of their GCSE exams. This process was compounded when YCLs could give a persuasive and empowering reason why students were selected.

> Student: *"[The YCL] wanted kids that actually wanted to do what they aspire to do… So then yeah. Then I was like, "All right, cool. No problem. If this is going to give me opportunities, then why not?"*

Conclusion

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	FINDINGS
1. To what extent was Career Ahead successfully implemented, with whom, under what circumstances and why?	• There is strong evidence that the implementation of Career Ahead varied by implementation outcome (O6). YCLs formed strong relationships with participants and offered relevant and helpful advice and support. However, both the group sessions and work experience received mixed feedback from students and YCLs, exposure to the intervention was less than intended, and difficulties getting recruiting students most likely to benefit persisted. • There is strong evidence that the implementation support provided by the HoD, including training and coaching (MResO), made an important contribution to the implementation successes observed by supporting the development of YCLs' competencies (MResP). So did the improvements to the intervention that were co-designed with YCLs, the HoD and the HoEP prior to Cohort 2, which included improvements to recruitment processes, training and coaching for YCLs, communication with schools and the design of group sessions . • The extent to which this environment enabled implementation was influenced by the strength and quality of school and corporate partnerships and the challenges posed by COVID-19 (Context).
2. How did implementation contribute to any reported changes in students' non-	• The change in non-cognitive skills observed through the WorkLinks Skills & Values Assessment Tool showed a slight decrease from pre- to post-intervention, but the difference was small and not statistically significant (p = 0.16). The small sample size likely contributed to the lack of statistical significance, and wider confidence intervals indicate uncertainty about the

[6] See figure 2 on page 21 for further detail on the components of each sub-theory.

cognitive skills, for whom, under what circumstances, and why?	impact of the intervention on non cognitive skills. Nonetheless, there is strong evidence that Career Ahead made an important contribution to the non-cognitive skills of some students. It did so by facilitating their engagement in development cycles, whereby YCLs helped students to identify and pursue goals and overcome obstacles along the way. • Whether and how students engaged in these cycles and benefited from Career Ahead depended on wider influences in their lives. This included their personal history, experiences, and capabilities as well as the strength of their support networks outside of Career Ahead. Some students already had sufficient support and did not need Career Ahead. Others with higher levels of need required more support at an earlier stage than Career Ahead could offer. Those who benefited had high-to-moderate levels of need. They engaged with YCLs because they lacked other sources of support.
3. How did students' non-cognitive skills contribute to any reported changes in EET outcomes, for whom, under what circumstances and why?	• There is some evidence of variation in the degree to which students entered positive EET placements following the end of year 11 (i.e. those aligned with their goals) (O). There is some evidence that their levels of non-cognitive skills and, for some, the follow-on mentoring provided by Career Ahead, made an important contribution. • However, follow-on mentoring experienced implementation challenges – it was not delivered at all in two schools – which limited its reach and impact (MResO). There is some evidence that non-cognitive skills and follow-on mentoring contributed by empowering students to take advantage of opportunities and protecting them from risks (MResP). Some of those with lower levels of non-cognitive skills at the end of year 11 did not get the placement they wanted, while others did not get a placement at all. For these students, follow-on mentoring was insufficient to help them move towards a more positive EET outcome. • Other students were able to enter and maintain a positive EET outcome without the help of follow-on support, due to the strength of their wider networks and their high levels of non-cognitive skills. But for students with sufficient levels of non-cognitive skills who lacked wider support networks, follow-on mentoring helped them to stay on track (Context).
4. How did implementation contribute to any reported	• There is some evidence that the lack of mentor-mentee matching between YCLs, and students contributed to limited engagement in the programme for some students. The YCL-student relationship drove students'

unintended consequences, for whom, under what circumstances, and why?	engagement in development cycles. Where this relationship was weaker due to misaligned interests and personalities, engagement suffered. • There is some evidence that negative labelling in groups temporarily impacted some students' engagement in Career Ahead. For both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2, the initial lack of clear messaging on why students were selected, and their perceptions of other group members led some students to believe that Career Ahead was for poorly behaved students or those with special educational needs. For students that did not associate with these identities, engagement suffered. Over time, through participation and the development of their relationship with their YCL, these impressions dissipated.

Table 13: Summary of overall project findings

Interpretation

We sought to establish Career Ahead's feasibility by exploring its programme theory, including any unintended consequences. This theory gave rise to four research questions that have guided the study, aimed at clarifying the feasibility of the delivery model and testing the assumptions in its theory of change—specifically, how Career Ahead can support more positive EET outcomes through non-cognitive skills development, including confidence, motivation, aspiration, resilience, communication, and teamwork.

To achieve this, we employed a theory-driven approach, using a combination of theory of change, realist evaluation, and contribution analysis. This approach allowed for a systematic approach to understanding how Career Ahead's mechanisms, and contextual factors contributed to results, addressing challenges often seen in realist evaluations and theory of change models. Contribution analysis also helped us consider rival influences on impact, which are sometimes overlooked in theory-based evaluations, and was particularly suited to this study's focus on gathering evidence of promise in the absence of comparison groups or large sample sizes.

The other key aim of this study was to inform and support programme modifications. Over the course of the evaluation, several improvements were made to Career Ahead through a structured process of refinement, guided by Dartington Service Design Lab's Rapid-Cycle Design and Testing methodology. This iterative approach, developed in collaboration with Making the Leap staff, targeted improvements across areas such as infrastructure, recruitment, session delivery, mentoring, and organisational practices. Key changes were prioritised to maximise their impact on Cohort 2. For example, recruitment was improved by integrating YCLs more closely into the selection process

and introducing a 'taster' session to better align participants with the programme's objectives. YCL training was streamlined with monthly sessions and additional support around safeguarding. Group sessions were better coordinated with schools to minimise scheduling conflicts, and the decision was made to discontinue the programme in PRUs due to significant implementation challenges. These modifications were designed to enhance the overall effectiveness and feasibility of the programme going forward.

While these modifications supported a marked improvement in students' experiences for Cohort 2, the evidence presented here on the feasibility of Career Ahead is mixed. YCLs were skilled practitioners and mentoring was overwhelmingly well-received by students. However, the evidence relating to group sessions and work experience was less conclusive, while targets for exposure were not met and targeting continued to experience challenges throughout cohorts 1 and 2. There is also evidence of some adverse effects, particularly those resulting from the lack of matching between YCLs and students. Furthermore, this study raises questions about the viability of follow-on mentoring as envisaged in Career Ahead, given the low participation rates from students, the constraints on delivery and the subsequent limitations on the potential for follow-on mentoring to support students to find and maintain post-16 placements aligned with their goals. These implementation challenges limited the opportunities students had to benefit from Career Ahead.

In April 2024, the evaluation team hosted a workshop for the fourth and final round of programme improvement. The findings from follow-on mentoring were shared, and a broader discussion on what MtL had learned from delivering Career Ahead was facilitated. MtL felt that a core driver of the challenges they faced with implementation was their relative inexperience in delivering interventions of the size, scope and intensity of Career Ahead.

MtL is a well-established non-profit with over 20 years' experience in designing and delivering non-cognitive skills development programmes across London. Their extensive network of school and corporate partners positioned them to efficiently launch Career Ahead in schools and with work experience providers. However, they had never previously worked in PRUs, delivered one-to-one mentoring, or delivered anything as long-running as Career Ahead (18 months) – traditionally, their programme delivery was characterised by short-term interventions (up to 12 weeks). The YCL role also marked a significant step into the unknown; MtL's other programmes had always been delivered by volunteers, while the YCLs were formal employees requiring professional development planning and support. Even independently, all these factors would have demanded considerable time and energy to deliver to the intended standard; MtL was delivering them all together, as part of a single, multi-component intervention.

Despite these challenges, participants responded positively overall, with strong evidence showing movement through core elements of the theory of change. Career Ahead did contribute to improvements in some students' lives. Where it did so, this was because YCLs supported students through development cycles, by helping them to identify and pursue goals and overcome obstacles along the way. This helped them to develop non-cognitive skills, which enabled some students to transition into and maintain a positive EET outcome, depending on wider influences in their lives. Combined with the evidence underpinning the theory of change, particularly from the positive youth development field (e.g. Bonell et al., 2016), this suggests the focus on non-cognitive skills through development cycles in Career Ahead's programme theory is viable.

These findings have implications for wider policy and practice, including the role of school- and group-based mentoring programmes in supporting young people.

- **Flexible and adaptive delivery**: The benefits of Career Ahead's programme modifications, particularly in recruitment and session design, highlight the need for flexibility in programme delivery. Those commissioning, designing and delivering school- and group-based mentoring programmes should support their ongoing adaptation to meet the diverse needs of students and school environments. The introduction of the 'taster' session is an example of how early-stage engagement can help align students with the programme, ensuring better fit and engagement.
- **Holistic mentoring models**: The viability of non-cognitive skills—such as confidence, resilience, and communication— as a driver of improved EET outcomes reinforces the importance of mentoring programmes that go beyond academic support to foster personal growth.
- **Addressing structural barriers**: The withdrawal of the programme from PRUs due to implementation challenges underscores the importance of addressing systemic barriers in more complex educational settings. Policymakers should recognise the distinct needs of alternative provision environments. This includes one-to-one provision for those who find group interventions challenging and mobile practitioners that can follow young people as they cycle between PRUs, mainstream schools and other settings.
- **Continuous evaluation and iteration**: The use of Dartington's Rapid-Cycle Design and Testing methodology shows the value of continuous evaluation and refinement in improving programme outcomes. Policies that encourage the integration of real-time feedback loops and adaptive evaluation mechanisms can support the ongoing improvement of school-based mentoring initiatives.

Finally, limitations to this study should be acknowledged. These include: the administration of the participant pre-post survey by MtL and not independently by the evaluation team; the lack of a counterfactual in this study design; the lack of comparable UK- and young person-specific data for identifying thresholds for the MFQ-9; the lack of evidence gathered on the role and contribution of cultural capital to the benefits students experience from participating in Career Ahead; and the limited data on post-16 experiences or EET outcomes.

Future research and publications

This evaluation suggests that, when implemented well and with the appropriate target population, Career Ahead contributes to positive changes in young people's non-cognitive skill development. There is also evidence that this happens because the mechanisms posited in the theory of change are working as intended.

Yet two key questions remain unanswered:

- **What impact does Career Ahead have on EET outcomes?** While this evaluation gathered tentative evidence on the contribution of Career Ahead and non-cognitive skill development to post-16 placements, more research is needed using a research design that incorporates a counterfactual and looks more closely at Career Ahead's contribution to EET outcomes.
- **How can MtL address the challenges experienced with implementation to facilitate more effective delivery and student engagement, including minimising the role of adverse effects?** While improvements were made to Career Ahead over the course of this study, further work is required to bring Career Ahead up to the standard of implementation and stability required for a later stage impact evaluation. This would require a collaborative effort between MtL, schools and corporate partners and would most likely require a practical design and improvement approach geared towards facilitating regular cycles of iteration, of which Dartington's Rapid-Cycle Design and Testing methodology is one (Green et al., 2021).

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