LeedsACTS! Seedcorn 2018 Vignettes

“Young fatherhood: HE aspirations, successes and challenges”

Introduction

This vignette describes the delivery and outcomes of the “Young fatherhood: higher education aspirations, successes and challenges” Seedcorn project. The study was delivered by Leeds Trinity University/LTU and the Young Dads Collective/YDC North (managed by Coram Family and Childcare), and was funded by the LeedsACTS! Partnership.

The project investigated young fathers’ higher education/HE experiences, aspirations and challenges, whilst exploring the role of local practitioners and universities (using LTU as an example) to enable better access, information and support for young fathers who aspire to enter HE or those who are current students.

Background

LeedsACTS!

LeedsACTS! is a partnership between the city's three universities and Third Sector organisations in Leeds. The LeedsACTS! Partnership aims to build relationships between researchers, students, charities, voluntary and community organisations to foster joint working for the benefit of the communities of Leeds.

In November 2017, LeedsACTS! launched a third round of Seedcorn funding, inviting Third Sector organisations and HE institutions to jointly apply. The aim of the Seedcorn projects is to help create a climate of collaboration. This may be achieved by:

(a) helping people to get to know each other better;
(b) identifying joint interests;
(c) developing/providing expertise that can be shared;
(d) raising awareness of the benefits of collaboration;
(e) helping to break down some of the barriers to joint working.

Young Dads Collective

The Young Dad Collective North is a collaboration between Coram Family and Childcare and Leeds City Council. The organisation aims to empower, support and train selected young fathers as experts by experience in advocacy work, on behalf of other young fathers, and engaging in practitioner training and consultation. The YDC directly employs and
Leeds Trinity University

Leeds Trinity University is based in Horsforth. Both undergraduate and postgraduate provision is offered at the university. The university is ranked in the top 20 for employability and student satisfaction in the UK, is the top university in Yorkshire for overall satisfaction (DLHE Survey 2016), and sixth in the UK for teaching quality (The Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide 2018).

What was the “Young fatherhood: HE aspirations, successes and challenges” Seedcorn Project?

In collaboration with the Young Dads Collective (YDC), this project had three main aims:

1) Create a ‘HE Pathway’ information leaflet outlining what HE support is available in Leeds for young fathers (and national initiatives where applicable). The document would be professionally designed for various dissemination pathways to help inform young fathers and practitioners;

2) Invite young fathers, local practitioners and LTU professionals to discuss their views on young fathers’ HE aspirations, experiences and challenges (through focus groups, individual interviews and online questionnaires) to gain a better understanding of these issues and what support young fathers may need.

3) A data sharing event for local stakeholders and young fathers post-funding (envisaged for November 2018). The ‘HE pathway’ document will be launched at this event and copies will then be made available to attendees and online via various HE and young fatherhood related websites.

What did the “Young fatherhood: HE aspirations, successes and challenges” Seedcorn Project Do?

1) An initial version of the HE information leaflet has been created for young fathers and practitioners. Some of the information contained with the document came as a direct result of the participants’ accounts and experiences. The leaflet is currently being circulated amongst young fathers, practitioners and LTU professionals for their feedback before it is finalised for dissemination (i.e. post-funding, November 2018).

2) Various data collecting activities occurred in Leeds as part of the project, with the young fathers, local practitioners and LTU professionals. This included face to face group interviews or individual interviews and online questionnaires.
3) At the time of writing (July 2018), a total of 8 young fathers, 18 practitioners and 7 LTU professionals had participated in the project. We envisage a slight increase in these numbers as some data collecting meetings have been delayed until September and the online questionnaires will remain open for completion until the end of July.

4) In November 2018 we will be organising the project’s dissemination event which will be held in Leeds as part of a Leeds City Council training event, or at Leeds Trinity University. Further details to follow.

Achievements and Key Outcomes

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<th>Outcomes</th>
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<td>HE information document</td>
<td>A clear and accessible information leaflet about HE, HE choices and financial support is in the process of being finalised for young fathers and practitioners. The leaflet will be made available by the end of the year through the dissemination event. Copies of the HE document will also be made available online and given to practitioners and/or various organisations around Leeds to promote the leaflet (e.g. Children’s Centres) after the dissemination event.</td>
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<td>Data collected on young fathers’ HE aspirations, HE experiences and challenges faced.</td>
<td>The views from young fathers, practitioners and LTU professionals have offered interesting insights into young fathers’ HE experiences and challenges. When speaking to young fathers, the project uncovered the importance of education for these young men and their future ambitions. At the same time, some young men expressed their anxieties and the perceived difficulties of entering HE. For those with HE aspirations, young fathers knew very little about the financial support available to them if applying for HE. For young fathers who were HE students, the complex demands of juggling studying with family life was explored, what university support they were aware of and if it had been sought, and why some young fathers choose to drop out of HE. The young fathers’ accounts were particularly useful for the HE information leaflet and were taken into consideration for the design and content. The young fathers’ views also help practitioners and LTU professionals in their various roles, in</td>
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terms of how to support young fathers better, and how to make university information more accessible for prospective and current students who are also young fathers (e.g. marketing information, student support etc).

Listening to the views of practitioners and LTU professionals allowed a better understanding of how young fathers are currently supported in relation to returning to education and how universities can engage and reach out to those from non-traditional HE backgrounds (e.g. older students, those who are parents). Both the practitioners and LTU professionals were keen to develop links with one another (as they do not presently exist) to help support young fathers better at various stages of the HE process. Through the project, relationships between local practitioners and relevant LTU departments are starting to develop.

The discussions with practitioners and LTU professionals offered an opportunity for individuals to reflect on their current practice. For some participants, the research lead them to consider and implement new ways of working or thinking around the needs of young fathers who are current or potential students.

**Findings and analysis**

New empirical data has been collected in relation to young fathers and their HE experiences from a range of viewpoints. This will contribute towards the existing literature in relation to young fatherhood research in the UK, which is currently limited in comparison to young motherhood studies.

Academic and Practitioner publications and other engagement events are envisaged after the project; this will help to share and circulate the findings of the study more widely.

**Dissemination event**

Successful dissemination event in November with positive feedback received from attendees. We plan another dissemination event in 2019 to explore the findings in more detail.
Successes

The collaboration with the YDC was extremely successful and we were able to deliver the project aims as stipulated, through good organisation, regular communications, a mutual interest in the topic, and a shared belief in the potential benefits that such a study could bring for various individuals.

The seedcorn funding enabled the project partners to create a new collaboration to investigate young fathers’ HE experiences and challenges and the appropriate resources to do so. At the same time, new working relationships between local practitioners (e.g. health, social, educational and employment sectors) and various LTU departments (e.g. student support, student outreach, communications) have been developed through the project, to help support young fathers and understand their HE needs. It was very apparent that both local practitioners and LTU representatives were keen to understand and engage in the work of one another with regards to young fathers and HE. These relationships may lead to further initiatives in the future.

Wider Impacts

As the project is yet to draw to a close it is difficult to comment fully on the wider impacts. However the HE information leaflet is envisaged to make local impact in terms of helping young fathers and practitioners who have HE aspirations and interests. As the HE leaflet will be uploaded to relevant online websites, the document has potential to reach a national audience also.

The dissemination event post-funding will be an opportunity for local practitioners to learn about the experiences of young fathers. Through the event, it is hoped that it will encourage attendees to consider the effectiveness of current support strategies for young fathers, identify gaps in provision, and consider how the research can be adapted into individual settings.

As one the project applicant is a member of the APPG/All Party Parliamentary Group on Fatherhood, there may be an opportunity to present the study’s findings to the group in the near future.

Challenges

The time needed to set up the appropriate contracts between the collaborating organisations (including the budgeting arrangements) took longer than originally envisaged. Despite having a ‘preparatory’ stage before the study began, where it was assumed that such issues would be addressed, it was only in the final stages of the study when such matters were fully resolved. It cannot be under-estimated the amount of time needed for the necessary paperwork and protocols to be established when working with new organisations.
How has this Seedcorn Project Contributed to Addressing City Priorities?

Aims of the LeedsACTS partnership:

The emphasis is upon co-production and collaboration can be seen from the project’s inception through to the dissemination plans.

Through successful collaborative working, the project created new knowledge through the activities planned, whilst capitalising upon each other’s expertise to:

1. provide a voice for young fathers and practitioners with regards to HE aspirations and challenges;
2. improve information that is provided to young fathers about HE; (c) provide more guidance for relevant practitioners in Leeds;
3. help inform and improve current Widening Participation, Diversity and Inclusion policies at LTU, with young fathers specifically in mind.

Leeds Best Council Plan Priorities (2017/18)

By utilising the seedcorn funding available and through the envisaged activities, young fathers and the practitioners who support them, will be offered more guidance on applying for universities, possible steps needed beforehand (e.g. Access to HE courses), and the support available to them (e.g. student loans). By providing such information in the HE Pathway document, and through the dissemination event, young fathers can make an informed decision about their future and practitioners will have a greater understanding of these issues also.

Supporting young fathers to aspire and to reach their full potential is vital, and the importance of supporting young people and their academic achievements can be seen in Leeds City’s Priorities and the Council’s recently launched ‘3A’s’ agenda (i.e. attend, achieve and attain). Given that young fathers are more likely to be living in disadvantaged circumstances, offering advice about HE and educational support in general is significant.

Concluding Remarks

The project has been successful in meeting the aims envisaged and provided useful data on young fathers’ HE aspirations and journeys, which has included the views of young men themselves, local practitioners and university representatives.

The creation of the HE information leaflet will help support young dads with HE interests and will contribute towards the work of local practitioners who support young fathers in the region.
Through the project, LTU representatives and local practitioners have brokered new relationships to work in a new collaborative manner to help support young fathers who are prospective or current students.

The study has also offered the professional participants (i.e. LTU representatives and practitioners) an opportunity to reflect and improve upon current practice through the discussions held during the data gathering process. This has led to new thinking and revised practice in relation to supporting young fathers with educational ambitions and goals and for those who are current students.

Other publications and events post funding will help to circulate the leaflet and the findings of the study to a wider audience and allow the study to have a larger reach and impact.

**Beneficiary Evidence and Feedback**

It was important to explore young fathers’ HE interests, aspirations and challenges as there is little information on this topic matter. When speaking to practitioners, LTU professionals and young fathers themselves, it was apparent that more HE support and guidance would be particularly helpful for young men who also have child caring responsibilities. Young fathers expressed that there was little HE advice currently available to them, or information was aimed at young mother and younger more ‘traditional’ students.

**As some young fathers suggested:**

- “I do not believe young fathers are provided enough encouragement and support.”
- “I believe that options, including those online and in University prospectuses are deeply flawed and are generally aimed at those going from A-Level to HE without any complications. So, it is no wonder young parents and especially young fathers are put off.”
- “Young fathers need to know they won’t be at a disadvantage. Relevant support needs to be sent out to potential applicants and students need to know if they are becoming or want to become fathers, they will still receive the same opportunities.”

As such, the creation of a HE information leaflet which was geared specifically towards young fathers, their concerns and the specific support available for this population, was highly appreciated by young fathers that we spoke to.

**Comments from young fathers in the project included:**

- “Great design” and “This would have been useful to see before I started Uni”.

As the HE leaflet is for practitioner and LTU use also, we also collected feedback on its usefulness and effectiveness from these two groups.
Comments from LTU practitioners were also very encouraging:

- “I love the design.” (LTU professional)
- “I think it good and I like the design overall. The information around the options available and the financial support is important to have in there.” (Practitioner)
- “Think it read well, lots of useful information about further education, paying back student loans dependent on salary etc.” (Practitioner)
- “This looks really user friendly, has lots of short but useful pieces of info about how to go about it…. And importantly info about possible support with finance.” (Practitioner)

Feedback from the dissemination event in November demonstrated wide practitioner interest in the subject matter and enthusiasm for another event to explore the study’s findings in more detail next year.

Feedback about the event included:

- “Really made me think about involving young fathers”
- “Useful info”