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RETROSPECTIVE IMPACT EVALUATION

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🤝 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

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The Project:

The aim of the study is to assess the longer-term impact of the R-CITY Leadership Programme (Programme) on the adolescent participants' life outcomes in terms of their wellbeing, life skills, leadership skills and community engagement. The research group covered cohorts between 2013-2019. R-CITY is located in North Belfast and the Programme draws young participants from the socio-economically pressurised, culturally segregated Shankill and Ardoyne districts. The establishment of positive developmental gains early in adolescence is significant in encouraging and reinforcing continued development into adulthood (Scales et al., 2000; Konopka, 1973).

The study gathered evidence through a methodology of mixed techniques that included self-assessed survey together with focus group interviews. The longer-term impact of participation in the Programme was assessed using indicators representing wellbeing, life skills and leadership skills.

Key Findings:

Survey respondents reported high levels across all indicators of wellbeing, life skills and leadership skills. This is supported by qualitative anecdotal information in which the participants attribute their positive self-reported outcomes to their past engagement in the R-CITY Programme.

Other Key Findings include:

Positive impact on Education:

44% of the survey respondents were pursuing or had completed university education. Development of new knowledge and skills was also one of the most highly rated leadership skill indicators.

Impact on diverse and inclusive social connections:

97% value knowing people of a different background while **98%** stay in touch with friends or people of a different background.

Executive Summary *ctnd.*

Other Key Findings include:

Wider impact on family household through to community social action:

the beneficial gains of the young participants from the R-CITY Programme have had positive ripple effect to influence other members of their family households. **85%** report engagement in community projects after participation in R-CITY while **88%** declare better awareness of community projects and collaboration.

Impact on self-identity and resilience:

participants' self-conception changed due to R-CITY's Programme, from low confidence, without future aspirations, holding insular views and negativity prior to the Programme, to their current self-conception characterised by confidence, optimism and resilience to progress toward future aspirations.

1.0 Introduction

The adolescent stage of life is a period of intense transition involving physical, emotional, mental and social changes. Opportunities for experimental learning to develop a sense of who they are, how they view the world and what they are capable of are critical and can establish foundations for youth to further their development and achieve positive life outcomes (Liu et al. 2020; Erikson, 1968). Structural and social obstacles, such as material deprivation, segregated sectarian communities and lack of opportunity to practice self-efficacy are detracting factors (Liu et al., 2020; Murphy and Johnson, 2011).

The legacy of sectarian violence during the Troubles continues to linger in everyday life in Northern Ireland with children and young people subjected to the 'impact of a conflict not of their making' (NICCY, 2018). Segregated schools and interface 'peacewalls' separating neighborhoods are a few examples of how physical separation reinforces mental separation and fear of the 'other' (Gormley-Heenan, 2014 in Leonard, 2017). North Belfast, which was a flash point of violent conflict, continues to be burdened with poor socio-economic markers for youth, such as child poverty and lower educational attainment (Gray et al., 2018). The cumulative effect of these daily barriers to life together with continuing paramilitary intimidation creates extreme challenges for youth to flourish and lead productive lives (McAlister et al., 2009:26).

continued overleaf |

1.0 Introduction *ctnd.*

R-CITY since 2013 through its core Leadership Programme (Programme) has offered youth in North Belfast a pathway to learn and explore their own identity and the wider world in a safe and challenging environment.

While R-CITY continues to expand its activities and reach, their main Programme has seen over 300 adolescents and young adults participate since inception. The three-year pathway is multi-faceted with a strong ethos focused on both respect for the individual as well as wider community social action. This retrospective study will examine the impact of R-CITY's Programme on the lives of the young participants with particular focus on their wellbeing, life skills and leadership skills today, together with the broader communal impact.

1.1 The R-CITY Leadership Programme:

The R-CITY leadership Programme is an integrated pathway of learning and development to nurture the young participants' capability to reach their potential for themselves and their communities. A unique aspect of the Programme is its three-year timespan which permits a wide variety of experiences and the opportunity to build lasting relationships, both of which support sustained retention for positive development and long-term impact.

> "While R-CITY continues to expand its activities and reach, their main programme has seen over 300 adolecents and young adults participate since inception."

The Programme's **theory of change** focuses on four aspects (R-CITY, 2020):

i) **Creating proud, confident young people** – self-awareness of own values, strengths and aspirations together with experiences to develop skills.

ii) **Prioritising education** – promotion of education as a means to create future opportunities

iii) **Importance of relationships** – centering right relationship across cultures, generations and throughout the community as the foundation for wellbeing and prosperity

iv) **Community impact** – instilling social action as a means to contribute to the community.

R-CITY's Leadership Programme contains three stages:

Stage 1 is a 5-day residential summer camp where participants are guided to explore their personal life journeys and appreciate those of others.

Stage 2 follows with weekly activities over the next two years to build upon the personal discoveries and new friendships of the summer camp. Interwoven into the regular sessions are opportunities to build and practice skills, including through community social action. The participants are supported to prepare for experiences in both regional and international environments.

Stage 3 is focused on activity where the participants 'take the lead' to self-direct their own training and development programming with support from R-CITY staff.

Throughout the Programme is the emphasis on education, personal development and self-efficacy to build confidence, skills and resilience to achieve future goals. In parallel over the course of the three-year pathway is growing awareness of community and cross-community relationships which is tied to their social action as change makers.

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1.2 Adolescent/Youth wellbeing and development:

Adolescence is a unique stage of human development in the lifespan, the purpose of which is not merely to prepare for adulthood but as individuals fully participating in society. To develop, humans learn through experimentation and the exposure to wider circles of people, cultures and experiences is key to allow adolescents to discover, challenge and form their own strengths and value systems (Konopka, 1973).

Also significant during this period is the shaping of self-identity (Erikson, 1968), through not only inward self-reflection but also outwardly in different situations as members of a household, workplace, peer groups and as contributing citizens of the community. Importantly, the extent to which youth are exposed to and participate in appropriate experiences will determine and maximize their development (Konopka, 1973).

1.2 Adolescent/Youth wellbeing and development *ctnd.*:

Studies have shown that adolescent wellbeing or 'thriving' is an indicator of healthy development for positive life outcomes. Indicators, such as leadership, helping others, educational success, valuing diversity, delaying gratification, and overcoming adversity, have been linked not only to positive outcomes during adolescence but also longer-term to success in young adulthood (Scales et al., 2000). Additionally, studies in leadership development note that both self-identity which encompasses facets of leadership, together with self-regulation to reach goals, are strongly linked to a positive virtuous spiral of self-efficacy and good outcomes (Avolio and Hannah, 2008). This positive development is particularly important for effectiveness in stressful and challenging environments (Hannah et al., 2008).

With respect to thriving in youth, one study concluded that the level of positive outcomes was significantly related to the amount of time a young person spent in youth programmes, where they may encounter caring relationships with adult role models other than parents, as well as with supportive peers.

Other benefits of youth programmes which contribute to positive life outcomes are activities that build skills, help others, offer leadership roles, and practice inclusivity in a group setting (Scales et al., 2000). Whilst specific activity in a youth programme may focus on one particular skill or indicator, it is recognized that they influence each other, with development in one skill supporting better levels in other skills and indicators.

Furthermore, studies concentrating on leader development in adolescence found that youth leadership development is most effective when opportunities for experience and practice are provided through different contexts and diverse settings including family, school, and community (Liu, et al., 2020).

1.3 Aims of the impact evaluation:

The aim of the study is to evaluate the longer-term impact of the R-CITY Programme on the youth and young adults who participated since its initial roll-out in 2013. The evaluation will center on the sustained impact of the Programme's theory of change on the wellbeing, life skills, leadership skills and community social action of past participants. The study will not examine the Programme design or implementation. Further, although literature confirms that societal gender expectations and 'leader' stereotypes can influence how boys and girls develop (Murphy and Johnson, 2011), the environmental social factors that differentiate between the genders will not be covered in the scope of the study.

Included in the study are participants in cohorts which commenced and completed the R-CITY Programme between 2013 and 2019. This time span results in a post-programme period of approximately 18 months to five years since the participants completed, offering the opportunity to examine longer-term effects.

The research aiims are:

i) To establish the self-assessed level of wellbeing, life skills and leadership skills of the study participants post-programme.

ii) To establish the longer-term impact of the Programme on the participants' level of wellbeing, life skills and leadership skills.

iii) To establish the impact that participation in the Programme has had on their knowledge of and engagement in broader community social action.

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R-CITY MY CHOICES PROGRAMME

2.0 METHODOLOGY

A mixed methods approach was undertaken to meet the research aims and yielded both quantitative and qualitative information. This multiple source approach is common practice for leadership programme evaluations and will provide a better understanding of the impact of the Programme (Reinelt et al., 2002).

2.1 Selection of measurement indicators:

The purpose of this study is to assess the longer-term impact of the Programme on the participants' capability to lead productive lives through developing their own potential and contributing to that of their communities. These outcomes are represented by the four key themes of R-CITY's theory of change (R-CITY, 2020). For this study, these outcomes were grouped into indicators to measure impact: wellbeing, life skills, leadership skills and community awareness/social action (Table 1). All measures are self-assessed by the research participants.

– TABLE 1 –

INDICATOR	R-CITY Theory of Change Outcomes			
	Creating proud, confident young people	Prioritising education	Importance of relationships	Community impact
Wellbeing	X		X	X
Life Skills	X	X	X	X
Leadership Skills	X	X	X	X
Community Awareness/Social Action	X		X	X

To assess levels of wellbeing, the EPOCH tool was employed which measures adolescent wellbeing characteristics represented by engagement, perseverance, optimism, connectedness and happiness. EPOCH is a 20-item measure that has been found to demonstrate adequate psychometric properties to assess adolescent 'thriving' and positive psychological functioning (Kern et al., 2016) (Appendix 1).

The assessment of life skills was based on indicators related to decision making, critical thinking, communication, team work/working with diversity, and goal setting/problem solving- all skills considered vital for youth to navigate through life situations and for leadership (Perkins, 2001 in UNESCO, 2013:49).

The tool is supported by reliability and validity testing (Mincemoyer and Perkins, 2005 in UNESCO, 2013:49). The questionnaire employed in this study was shortened to 19 items, from the original 27 items, to enhance the practicality of administering the questionnaire while maintaining focus on the main indicators (Appendix 2).

To assess leadership skills for this study, the researcher developed a 15-item measure to reflect R-CITY's theory of change and their Programme aims for their young participants.

Inputs were taken from the Foróige Leadership for Life programme (UNESCO, 2013:49) with which R-CITY has a partnership to provide their North Belfast participants potential qualifications.

The resulting tool contains 15-items which look at the following indicators: opportunities to be a leader; ability to motivate others; self-control; conflict resolution; ability to reflect critically; courage and confidence in own values; and self-development through skills and knowledge (Appendix 3).

A limitation of this tool is that it has not been used or tested previously, while the benefits of using this measure is that it asks questions pertaining to the North Belfast context in which the R-CITY Programme operates.

2.1 Selection of measurement indicators *ctnd.*:

The final indicator of community awareness and broader outcomes was analysed by asking the study respondents: i) whether they have been involved in community social action since the Programme; ii) what types of activity; and iii) whether their awareness of their community, leaders, institutions and the collaboration between them has increased as a result of their community action.

2.2 Research participants:

The research group comprised participants who engaged in cohorts which completed the programme between 2013 and 2019. The research group's post-programme period covered by this investigation spans approximately 18 months (for the 2016-2019 cohort) to five years (for the 2013-2016 cohort) and adequately represents analysis of longer-term impact.

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Respondents for an anonymous online survey were invited to participate through a post on the R-CITY Facebook members page from January–February 2021.

Focus group participants were recruited amongst current staff and volunteers of R-CITY on a snowball basis, who were also former R-CITY participants.

Two focus groups were formed representing the first cohort (2013) and the most recent cohort (2016) included in the study. A limitation of the research is the relatively small sample size of the focus groups due to the logistical challenge to coordinate post-programme participants collectively.

2.3 Quantitative data:

An online survey was employed to gain a broad understanding of how past participants see themselves today. In particular, the respondents were asked to self-assess their perceived level of wellbeing, life skills and leadership skills based on the tools described in section 2.1. The survey was comprised of statements which characterize indicators and attributes for which the respondents chose a response as to how much it applied to them on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = almost never/not at all like me to 5 = almost always/very much like me), with higher scores indicating more thriving (Kern et al., 2016; Scales et al., 2000).

What is true for all self-reported data is that the responses could reflect misrepresentation or error. Sources of such distortion could be presenting oneself in a favourable way, surmising they should illustrate an intervention as effective, or misunderstanding the survey questions (Beadnell et al., 2017).

Further, all survey questions were positively worded. Although there is argument for including negatively worded questions, the positive psychology framework suggests that positive functioning is not simply the reverse of negative functioning. Positive wording reflects different qualitative states than negative wording (Kern et al., 2016). To mitigate possible bias of self-assessment and positively worded questions, two focus groups were conducted to investigate the indicators with in-depth inquiry.

2.4 Qualitative data:

The study aims to capture information on the longer-term impact of the Programme. The impact of a leadership programme can be evidenced in changes in behaviour, values and beliefs which support the participants for success in their adult life. This information can be captured through brief anecdotes of the participants' experiences and accompanying transformation which highlight the young person's perspective.

A retrospective approach to data collection was employed as no baseline data from a pre-programme and/or post-programme evaluation were available. This method asks participants to describe how they were at two time points: how they were at the time of the current study post-programme, and how they were before the programme (Pratt et al., 2000 in Beadnell et al., 2017).

Use of retrospective collection has been shown to exhibit a more objective measure of evaluation compared to pre-programme collection (Bray et al., 1984; Howard et al., 1979 in Beadnell et al., 2017). This is based on the critical feature that respondents:

> *may not correctly understand and interpret questions before an intervention. For example, participants may overestimate their knowledge on a topic before receiving information about it in a program. Hence, their self-assessment of knowledge [could] be inaccurately high if asked before the program (Moore and Tananis, 2009 in Beadnell et al., 2017:47).*

Given that the participants are 15 or 16 years of age at the outset of the Programme, it is possible that they may not provide data that reflects their understanding of R-CITY's Programme outcome concepts at the pre-programme stage, nor their own self-concept.

2.4 Qualitative data *ctnd.*:

To enhance the impact evaluation and understanding of the longer-term effects of the R-CITY Programme, qualitative data was gathered through two methods:

i) the online survey included questions to capture comments on how R-CITY had impacted on them, specifically their level of wellbeing, life skills, leadership skills and engagement in/knowledge of wider community social action. The responses were analysed and grouped into key themes.
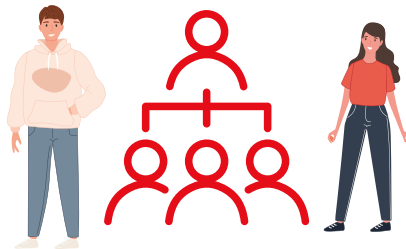
ii) two focus group sessions (30 minutes and 45 minutes) were held to investigate the longer-term enduring impact of the R-CITY programme. A semi-structured interview method was employed to allow for in-depth enquiry as data emerged from the sessions. The two focus groups represented two cohorts of four participants each: cohort 2013 had 3 males and 1 female while cohort 2016 had 2 males and 2 females. The interviews were not conducted face-to-face but virtually to comply with Covid-19 health regulations. All participants were of adult age and consented both to participation in the virtual focus group and for the sessions to be recorded.

The focus group sessions were transcribed with the responses analysed and grouped into key themes. A retrospective data collection technique, as discussed earlier, was used to capture information on the 'before-after' impact of the Programme on their development and life outcomes.

The key themes from the online survey and the focus group sessions were compared. The themes from both were found to be consistent.

2.5 Limitations and contextual considerations:

This study's evaluation of the longer-term impact of the Programme presents possible limitations. As the methodology did not utilize a strict randomized controlled design, the causal role of the Programme on longer-term impact cannot be directly inferred. Further, as discussed earlier on self-reported data (sections 2.3 and 2.4), which is subject to a 'social-desirability effect, especially when examining character virtues...such as perseverance, sense of purpose and self-efficacy' (Murphy et al., 2020:8), misrepresentation in the measures may occur.

The research was carried out during a high alert period of the Covid-19 pandemic mandating 'stay-at-home' public health measures. Social contact outside of one's household was not permitted resulting in typical face-to-face connection being replaced by virtual mediums.

The accumulation of 'Zoom fatigue' (Ramachandran, 2021) on top of increased financial hardship and academic pressures triggered by the pandemic has been found to create burdens on the wellbeing and mental health for young people (Hegell, 2021). Whilst data collection on the impact of the pandemic is ongoing, it appears that young people already facing challenges in their lives before the pandemic seem likely to have been hardest hit, while those who have access to resources and social support are likely to manage the lockdown and bounce back (Hegell, 2021:11).

This environmental context may have impact on how the research group respond in the survey and focus group interviews.

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R-CITY VOLUNTEERS

3.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1 Survey respondents

A total of **59** respondents completed the online anonymous survey from *January to February 2021*. This group represented **24%** of the total population of participants enrolled in the R-CITY Programme between *2013* and *2019*. The responses exhibit a fairly even representation based on gender and cultural tradition (Diagram 1) *[overleaf]*.

The majority of the respondents were between the ages of **18–21** reflective of larger programme cohort sizes in more recent years. With the option to select more than one response to describe activity undertaken since completing the R-CITY Programme, **68%** have engaged in work, **44%** have undertaken university studies while **32%** have continued with school/college. When asked about leadership, **90%** of the respondents replied that they perceived themselves as a leader.

3.1 Survey respondents *ctnd.*:

GENDER

- DIAGRAM 1 -

CULTURAL TRADITION

- 🔴 Male
- ⚪ Female
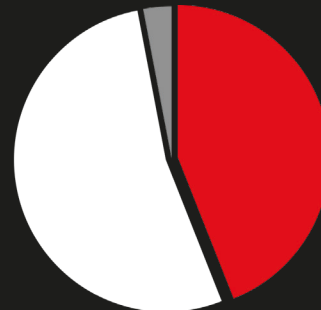
- 🔴 Catholic
- ⚪ Protestant
- ⚫ Prefer not to say

AGE

- 🔴 18-21 Years
- ⚪ 22+

ACTIVITY POST R-CITY

School/College

University

Work

0   17.5   35   52.5   70
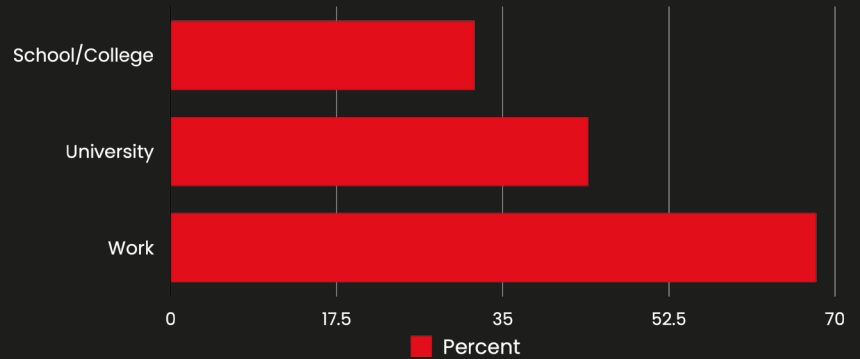
🔴 Percent

*100% of the respondents engaged in one or more of school/college, university and work.

3.2 Wellbeing:

The measurement of wellbeing captures how well the participants are flourishing and functioning effectively psychologically. From the perspective of positive psychology, functioning well is more than the absence of mental health problems but being aware of and using strengths for positive life outcomes (Kern et al., 2016). For the study, indicators of wellbeing were based on the characteristics of engagement, perseverance, optimism, connectedness and happiness, as set out in the EPOCH tool (Kern et al., 2016) (section 2.1).

Across the survey group, respondents assessed themselves with very high levels of wellbeing resulting in an average rating of **4.27** out of 5, with **83%** of all responses scoring a 4 or 5. The indicators of wellbeing that were particularly strong were connectedness and perseverance (Table 2).

Indicators that scored lower, though still contributing to positive wellbeing, related to the respondents' engagement with activities and optimism.

This may be reflective of the survey having been conducted during a particularly restrictive phase of Covid-19 pandemic measures in Northern Ireland severely limiting face-to-face social activity.

– TABLE 2 –

Ratings of Wellbeing

4.27	Overall average score (scale 1 to 5)

Responses with the highest scores:

4.8	There are people in my life who really care about me.
4.8	When something good happens to me, I have people who I like to share the good news with
4.7	I have friends that I really care about
4.5	I am a cheerful person
4.5	I am a hard worker

Responses with the lowest scores:

|	
3.7	When I am learning something new, I lose track of how time has passed
3.6	I get so involved in activities that I forget about everything else
3.6	In uncertain times, I expect the best

3.2 Wellbeing *ctnd.*:

The nature of the high levels of wellbeing is reflected in the group's comments as to how the R-CITY Programme has had an impact on their wellbeing in the following key themes:

- **Created a support network including lifelong friendships and mentorship**

- **Helped find a new outlook, positivity, future perspective, and the hope to seek opportunities**

- **Gained confidence and self-esteem to believe in self**

Participation in the R-CITY Programme has had a lasting impact on the participants in feeling empowered and positive about themselves and their future, as expressed by this participant:
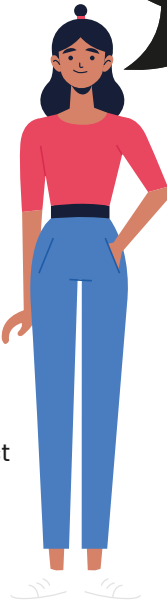
> **Given me hope and excitement for the future as it's shown how I have the power to determine my future. It also gave me support at a crossroads time of my life. With this support I feel I made the best decisions when going for opportunities presented to me.** *(Female, 26).*
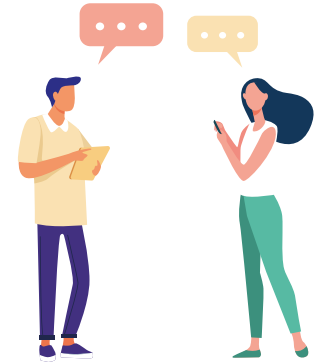
3.3 Life skills:

Life skills represent the capability needed to navigate through daily circumstances to succeed, both expected and unexpected. For this study, life skills have been defined as: decision making, critical thinking, communication, team work/working with diversity, and goal setting/problem solving (UNESCO, 2013).

The group overall rated their life skills very highly with an average score of **4.26** out of 5, with **86%** of all responses scoring a 4 or 5. The indicators scoring the highest exhibit strong ability to work with others/diversity, as well as problem solving/goal setting (Table 3). Responses which were rated lower, though still positively self-assessed, relate to more nuanced aspects of communication and goal setting.

3.3 Life Skills *ctnd.*:

– TABLE 3 –

	Ratings of Life Skills
4.26	Overall average score (scale 1 to 5)
Responses with the highest scores:	
4.7	I value knowing people of a different background (e.g. ethnicity, education, sexual orientation, disability, religious belief). *
4.7	I stay in touch with friends or people of a different background. **
4.4	Both positive and negative feedback help me work towards my goal.
4.4	When solving a problem, I try to think of possible solutions.
4.4	I can work with someone who has different opinions than mine.
Responses with the lowest scores:	
4.0	I am aware of my emotions and manage them when speaking with others.
4.0	I make sure I understand what another person is saying before I respond.
3.8	After setting a goal, I break goals down into steps so I can check progress.

*97% of respondents rated this as 4 or 5- quite like me/very much like me.

**98% of respondents rated this as 4 or 5- quite like me/very much like me.

In response to the question how the R-CITY Programme has had an impact on their life skills, the following key themes emerged:

• **Learned how to set goals, solve problems, and prioritise**

• **Developed overall skill set**

• **Improved communication skills and relationship building**

• **Raised aspirations to take risks/find path**

• **Developed resilience from setbacks**

• **Learned to work with people of different backgrounds**

The following response from a participant exemplifies the enduring impact that R-CITY has on her life skills:

> Due to the R-CITY leadership programme I am able to communicate effectively with others, I understand the importance of everybody getting their say and respecting others' opinions even if they are different from my own. I have a good understanding of how to get to the best possible outcome in problem solving/goal setting i.e. breaking the problem I'm hoping to solve into stages and finding how to set the smaller goals to reach with the finishing outcome being full resolved. *(Female, 23)*

3.4 Leadership skills:

While life is still generally centered around school and home for this age group, research has shown that youth programmes to develop skills and self-identity can play an influential role during this life span (Scales et al., 2000). Leadership skills for this study were defined as: taking opportunities to be a leader, ability to motivate others, self-control, conflict resolution, ability to reflect critically, courage and confidence in own values, and self-development through skills and knowledge (UNESCO, 2013:49).

The overall self-rating by the group was very high measuring **4.32** out of 5, with **89%** of all responses scoring a 4 or 5.

While some **10%** of the survey participants did not consider themselves to be a 'leader', all respondents nonetheless acknowledge skills in themselves that exhibit leadership, most prominently the ability to reflect critically, taking opportunities to be a leader, self-development, and courage and confidence in own values. (Table 4).

Leadership skills which were less present for the respondents, though still positively recognised, related to the ability to motivate others and to resolve conflict.

– TABLE 4 –

Ratings of Leadership Skills

4.32	Overall average score (scale 1 to 5)

Responses with the highest scores:

4.7	I am grateful for things in my life
4.7	Helping others is important to me
4.6	I try to do the right thing
4.5	I think about developing new skills or knowledge
4.5	I know my values and what is important for me

Responses with the lowest scores:

4.0	People follow my lead easily
3.9	I am known for inspiring other people to action
3.7	I am known for resolving conflicts

3.4 Leadership skills *ctnd*:

The development and longer-term presence of leadership skills for the participants is clear from their comments on how the R-CITY Programme had impact on their leadership capability:

• **Gained leadership skills through experiences to lead and self-develop with the encouragement to go out of comfort zone**

• **Feel confident to lead group, work one-on-one or guide others**

• **Learned how to lead self through own initiative**

• **Know my values, can stand up for what I believe in, and practice self-reflection**

• **Understand the importance of being a role model**

This response from a participant details the enduring impact of R-CITY on his leadership capability:
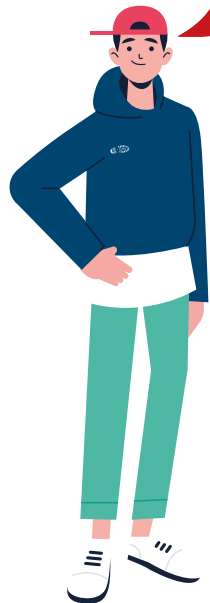
When I was in the R-CITY programme I didn't really see myself as a leader but reflecting on my time there it gave me the opportunity to be one and the skills I've gained from then stand me in good stead today. *(Male, 23 years)*

3.5 Community & broader impact:

The study also examined the wider impact of the R-CITY leadership Programme on the community from two perspectives: engagement in community social action and the level of awareness of community projects.

The vast majority of respondents confirmed both engagement in community social action as well as increased awareness of community projects as a result of participation in R-CITY (Diagram 2).

3.5 Community & broader impact *ctnd*:

- DIAGRAM 2 -

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

No 15%

Yes 85%

AWARENESS OF COMMUNITY & COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS

Same 12%

Greater 88%
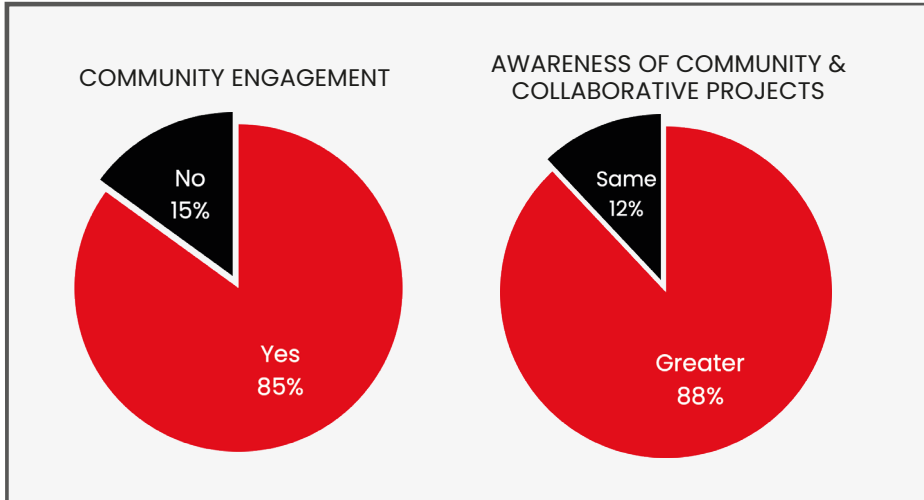
Most respondents' community engagement included volunteering in general community activity: food banks, senior care home visitors, children's sports, refugee groups, Christmas fairs, and Covid-19 food parcel delivery.

There was also participation in community and local residents' meetings, projects focused on cross-community work in integrated schools, and advocacy for mental health. Several participants also reported that they are now full-time youth workers or are pursuing university studies for youth work.

The skills and motivation for community engagement the participants gained from the R-CITY Programme has created a wider ripple effect bringing positive impact into the broader community:

R-CITY has done a lot to help the community and the young people absolutely love it. When part of R-CITY I done projects such as Christmas nights with the elderly, also giving Christmas hampers to the community with essentials they may need. (Female, 20)

I have been involved with the young people at Living Hope Belfast Church in the lower Shankill. I have been able to take everything that I learnt at R-CITY and begin to apply it in this area of my life which I am involved with now. (Male, 24).

4.0 DISCUSSION

Very high average scores were recorded across the respondent group for indicators of all three dimensions of wellbeing, life skills and leadership skills. These high ratings reveal positive levels of thriving well after their engagement in the R-CITY Programme. The nature of these very positive self-assessments is reflected in the high participation rate in education and/or work since leaving the Programme with **44%** of the research participants pursuing or having completed university.

In addition to concrete skills such as goal setting and communication, many participants stated that through R-CITY, they were inspired with self-belief to have agency over their own future careers and lives which they maintain to the present, well after completing the Programme. The ongoing contact with R-CITY staff and Programme peers throughout and post-completion has provided an emotional and social support network to sustain their development and wellbeing. The participants through the Programme not only gain skills and discover potential educational and career pathways, they also 'learn how to learn' through critical self-reflection and self-awareness which develops their capability to adapt in a variety of future life situations.

Areas of notable impact are education; diverse and inclusive social connections; broader ripple effect from family to community; and formation of positive self-identity and resilience.
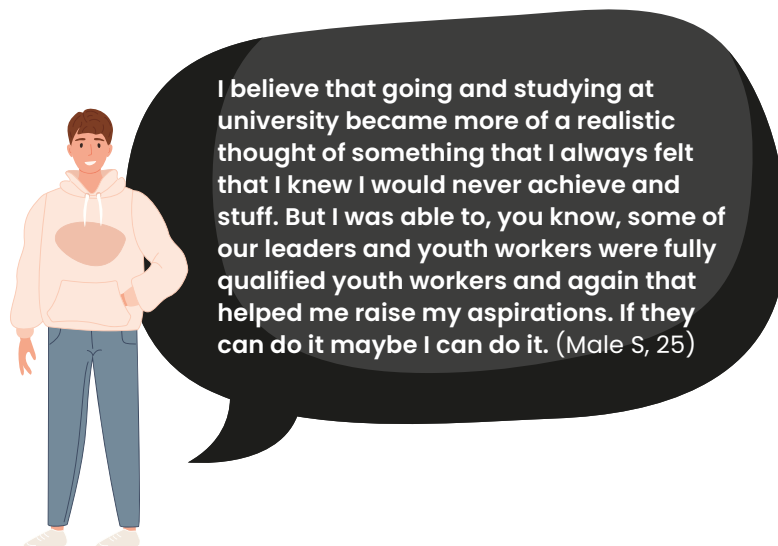
4.1 Impact on education

The participant survey confirms high rates of participation in pursuing education with 44% of those surveyed currently engaged in or already completed university. This finding is exceptional when compared to the overall rate of 18 and 19-year olds in Northern Ireland who took up university places in 2015 which was 43%, as reported by UCAS (Robbie, 2015).

Further, the R-CITY Programme has helped to provide role models as well as to transform the low personal aspirations and limiting self-belief of participants to attain educational achievements:

4.1 Impact on education *ctnd.*:

> Without this programme I would not have seen myself going back to college as I thought of myself as useless but they helped me gain back my confidence and reminded me that I can achieve anything if I put my mind to it. (Female, 20)

> I believe that going and studying at university became more of a realistic thought of something that I always felt that I knew I would never achieve and stuff. But I was able to, you know, some of our leaders and youth workers were fully qualified youth workers and again that helped me raise my aspirations. If they can do it maybe I can do it. (Male S, 25)

Moreover, the high rate of university entry amongst the R-CITY respondents is reflected in 'developing new skills or knowledge' being one of the highest rated indicators of leadership skills (section 3.4)**.**

Survey comments reveal that the Programme provided support and experiences for the youth to discover their passions through alternate routes. As adolescence is a unique stage where experimentation is essential to development (Konopka, 1973), the R-CITY Programme offers support for youth for whom the typical school pathway is not suitable. One focus group participant highlighted that regular school environments do not work for everyone. For them, R-CITY's Programme was effectively an informal education process through which they were introduced to the NUI Galway/Foróige Leadership for Life programme for accreditation and UCAS points. Gaining education in this manner was voluntary, suited their needs and instilled an appreciation for the value of education.

Through raising aspirations, encouraging self-belief and showing different educational pathways, R-CITY has had tangible longer-term impact on participants centering education and self-development for their future.

4.2 Impact on diverse and inclusive social connections:

The youth enrolled in the R-CITY Programme come from both the Protestant Shankill and the Catholic Ardoyne districts. Prior to joining R-CITY, the adolescents would have lived very insular and segregated lives knowing from their parents not to play with the 'other' or to 'never leave the gates'.

This is a significant change to how the participants self-reported for this study. In the life skills measure, three out of the top five most highly rated skills pertain to relationships and working with people of a different background: I value knowing people of a different background; I stay in touch with friends or people of a different background; and I can work with someone who has different opinions than mine (section 3.3).

The change participants experienced in their ability to appreciate and have relationships with people of diverse backgrounds is expressed in these comments:

> **Made me value relationships regardless of religious background.** (Female, 18)

> **RCITY give me the opportunity to engage with people from different cultures which helped with changing my perceptions of the other community and enriched my friendship circles which will stay with me for life** (Male, 21)

Through the R-CITY Programme, the participants were provided a safe and supportive environment to critically examine their own worldviews and explore new ones. Many participants highlighted that the Programme challenged and dismantled their preconceptions of the other community across the Northern Ireland sectarian divide, and now comment that they are proud to have friends across all traditions.

Furthermore, participants who engaged in the international experience element of the R-CITY Programme express a greater appreciation for different cultures and social situations across the world.

4.3 Wider impact from family household to community social action:

The ripple effect of the change in the participants is positively felt from the family home setting outward to the wider community.

This positive impact is seen in the high ratings in life skills indicator for communication and problem solving (section 3.3: both positive and negative feedback help me work towards my goal; when solving a problem, I try to think of possible solutions).

Within the family unit, some participants used self-regulation skills learned at R-CITY for better communication and relationships:

Being involved in R-CITY has kind of taught me new ways to deal with things. You know, like, if I've got an issue, you don't just fly off the handle and take it out on everybody in the house. You sit down, you talk about it...it's given me ways to actually socialise with people and problem solve, work things right and to make decisions. (Male D, 20)

Another ripple effect on families is the positive influence the participants have on other family members. One participant was pleased that her family noted the positive changes in her confidence and progress in life. This made her a role model for her younger siblings who look forward to enrolling in R-CITY when of age.

Another participant was proud that the open mindedness and inclusive outlook that they developed across cultures can have significant influence and change the sectarian views of other family members:

There's a lot of historical issues and myths and stereotypes. This programme enables young people to knock them out of their families. So they build relationships with someone from a different community and their family's able to get to know this person and then their family develops an understanding and more acceptance for someone who whether it be Catholic or Protestant. And I think that's, you know, that's definitely directly impacted from what we do on the R-CITY programme. (Male S, 25)

## 4.3 Wider impact from family household to community social action *ctnd*:

The positive impact of the R-CITY Programme on the participants also has wider community social impact. Involvement in community projects is high with 85% of survey participants confirming engagement in a variety of activity since leaving the Programme, including volunteering for food delivery and other logistical support in the past 12 months during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Further, a number of the survey and focus group participants are currently active as or are pursuing studies to become youth workers. The ethos of social action in R-CITY is reflected in the participants' drive to give back to the community and consistent with the characteristic to 'take opportunities to be a leader' in the survey.

Further, the statements 'helping others is important to me' and 'I am grateful for things in my life' were both the most highly rated in the study's leadership skills indicator (section 3.4) and are encapsulated by these participants' comments:

But it's just given me a real sense of passion to be able to provide them support, like I received through my time as I was growing up as a young person. (Male S, 25)
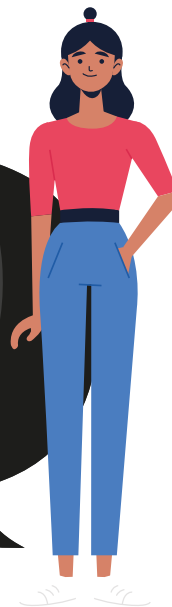
I have volunteered at a local Foodbank, refugee groups and currently working in Surestart, which is a project supporting vulnerable children within our community. I feel all of this has been inspired from my time spent with the R-City team... It has given me a true understanding of our individual roles and responsibilities within our community. (Female, 26)

4.4 Impact on self-identity and resilience:

The formation for young people of not only skills but also a positive self-identity together with self-regulation support achieving good life outcomes (Avolio and Hannah, 2008). As presented in previous sections, the survey participants confirmed through high outcome ratings and comments that they gained capability, confidence and resilience from the R-CITY Programme.

Focus group participants were asked to characterize themselves prior to joining the R-CITY Programme as well as their present self-conception. The responses emerging from this retrospective data collection technique reveal significant change in self-conception and how they see their future. Before R-CITY, collectively they could be described as lacking in confidence, no future aspirations, disruptive, negative, insular, and following peers/negative influences. With respect to their current self-conception, all focus group participants expressed a beneficial change in outlook and life prospects from the skills and resilience to achieve goals, which they attribute to their time in the R-CITY Programme (Table 5):

– TABLE 5 –
Change in self-conception

Participant	Before R-CITY	Present self-conception
Male P, 23	…quite disruptive. No direction, no sense of kind of where I was going or what I wanted to do…tagging along with friends and very easily peer pressured into things…I wasn't too sure of what where I was and who I was and what I was doing.'	…advocate for education…it's all about skill building. And it doesn't matter what route you want to go down. Within those 2, 3, 4 years, however long you stay on this programme, you will be building skills that will cater for you wherever you go in life or wherever you choose to go on life.'
Female C, 23	I was probably a really shy and under confident girl from the Protestant community.'	Since R-CITY and since what came after R-CITY I just think I'm a lot more self-aware now and have more of a sense of control over what happens in my life and where I want my life to go.'
Female M, 21	I think people would have described me as being very shy, maybe sort of quite negative outlook on things. Before I started on R-CITY, I had no goals or like no career ideas of what I wanted to do…I was like, more negative and very under confident.'	When I think of my future, I see it as very positive and exciting. Something that like I know that I'm going to be able to make a difference in many people's lives and I think that's because of my experience.'
Male E, 22	I was as a person was just in that sort of age group where you run with bit of a friend group, and everyone's going their own different ways. And maybe getting involved in negative influences and making negative choices…someone who was very under confident, very shy.'	In terms of the future, just optimistic…looking at stuff that's more optimistic and more positive, and just hoping for the best.'
Male D. 20	I was very into one friend group I didn't really explore. It was just me and my friends.'	It's a whole new world when you joined R-CITY, and I realised that no, these people aren't different… and seeing that there's a whole bigger world. It's not just about the friends that you have.'

4.5 How the R-CITY Programme sparks lasting impact:

The three-year design of the R-CITY Programme contains a variety of elements and activities to support the learning and development of the young participants through the critical emotional, mental and social changes of adolescence. Whilst this creates a holistic developmental experience, the focus group responses suggest that the multi-faceted character of the Programme also allows for individuals to be inspired and thrive according to their unique needs and interests (Table 6):

– TABLE 6 –

| Programme elements having lasting impact ||
Lasting Impact	Comments
Role models/staff	They were working class people from the areas that we were coming from the participants, and I think that's what made it wee a little bit more real for us. That wasn't someone who wasn't living in our area or facing the issues that we faced growing up as young people.' (Male S, 25) 'I think one of my standout moments would definitely be the staff influences that you have. And during our time, as like young people, or the staff that led our programme, were like role models…like it was genuine relationships that you were making.' (Female M, 21) 'Being a male in an area, in a working class area that I grew up in, sort of speaking out and having a laugh, maybe expressing a different side of yourself is seen as a weakness. As soon as I got to R-CITY, I was surrounded by positive role models and positive male role models and something I haven't really experienced that much before.' (Male E, 22)
Safe space of residential/ summer camp	It was probably like the first thing going on the residential…we were lead in to the first times of actually mixing with new people but wasn't as if you were going away for an overnight stay. It was five days with these people. So the relationships and connections which you built there were class! …You're took out of your own community, and you're brought down to somewhere completely new with people. So you have to get on with these people. And this is a real good opportunity to build relationships.' (Male C, 24) 'The summer camp is like, I think that was kind of the change in me… I was given a space, I was away from influences that helped run my life. I was going from family, friends, like my other friends. And it kinda, it was just a place where you could be yourself. And it kinda taught you a lot of things. It taught you a lot about others.' (Female S, 21)
Diverse relationships and support network	My best friends now will be the likes of D who is like a Protestant and I'm a Catholic, like, which I think unbelievable. That would have never happened without R CITY…So my standout moment would definitely be the relationships that you build with both your group and the staff and the staff just play a massive role in encouraging you, and always motivating you to do better.' (Female M, 21)

4.5 How the R-CITY Programme sparks lasting impact:

– TABLE 6 *ctnd.* **–**

Programme elements having lasting impact	
Lasting Impact	**Comments**
Diverse relationships and support network	'If I call back in or, you know, the relationship I have with the staff members and with people who were on my team when I was in R-CITY is, you know, it's certainly relationships I wouldn't see myself having with other people in other organisations' (Male E, 22)
Regular weekly sessions	My highlight will probably be the weekly sessions, just like the basic sessions each week. I think sometimes we really undervalue them and always think of the big things like the social actions or international trips, but I think the weekly sessions are like, it's an escape somewhat. I seen it as an escape, like an escape from reality and do something that I'm going to enjoy. And without knowing it at the time, but each session I learned something. (Female S, 21)

'It was just that one hour a week, where you were sort of being given space and time to unfold and actually speak about stuff that's important to you, for everybody, other people who could do the same thing. For me, it was always the environment created by R-CITY which was the highlight for me.' (Male E, 22) |
| Accreditation/UCAS points | 'So when you actually complete that accreditation, you go to Galway to the university and you have like a graduation ceremony… And for me as like a 15 year old it was a real proud moment. A moment that I'll always remember, because you were taken out of your own environment to begin with, down to the university, you were giving your gown, your cap and you were brought up on the stage to receive your certificate. And at that point in time, it was just a real sense of achievement for me. And then it made me realise like S said earlier that this is possible. I can take this further if I can do this, then I can definitely be back here in a couple of years' time graduating from a degree.' (Female C, 23) |
| New life and cultural experiences from the B2B trip to Africa | 'I was fortunate as well to go myself on that project and just going there it showed me you know, a new thing, you know, a new side to life, where you can be yourself… before that I had never travelled far across the world. Without the R-CITY programme I wouldn't have obviously been able to do that. And, again, that's just made me so aware…I go back to what I said about culture and communities and stuff. We were in Belfast…it was 24 people who were Catholic and Protestant when we went to travel on the B2B programme, and I think that's what opened my eyes to what youth work can actually do for young people. There was no longer a divide. It was just 24 people travelling together.' (Male S, 25)

'…we've been to Africa…getting out there and seeing the difference, you know, it just opened your eyes that your life's not that bad and I think again, we've all mentioned that it gives you more positive outlook on life. Things aren't always so bad…I would say Africa was the biggest highlight for me and I kinda made a decision that that's given me my career now.' (Male D, 20) |

4.6 It is a risk...but life changing if you let it be:

To query any negative outcomes of the Programme, the focus group participants were asked about commitments and negative impact in terms of participation in R-CITY.

Collectively, they asserted that there were risks and commitments to engaging in the Programme but these were overwhelmingly counterbalanced by potential benefits. The group confirmed that they did not experience nor see any negative impact from participation in R-CITY; however, from a realistic perspective, they acknowledge that not all youth work programming may be suitable for all individuals.

While pointing out that all participants have different experiences in R-CITY, the focus group interviewees were of the opinion that all young people leaving the Programme would have gained some skills or learning which would be beneficial to them throughout life.

I can't think of anything negative, or of anything that's really negatively impacted on the community or young people. But one thing that I will say, again, going back to the point that I made that youth work is not for all young people. So young people's outcomes after completing the programme are not going to be the same...Not all young people are, you know, none of us have the same journey is what I'm trying to say. And not everyone will be as positively impacted by youth work as what we are. But, again, I would like to think that every single participant, whether they believe it, or not, will come out of R-CITY with at least a couple of different aspects of learning. And that's for all walks of life. (Male S, 25)

I genuinely don't see a negative joining the programme. If it's not for you, that's fair enough, it's not for everyone, but it's definitely for a majority. And if it is for you, you just go with it and reap the rewards, reap the benefits. It's like anything, it's definitely out of your comfort zone at first. It's just about getting yourself involved getting yourself you know, looking at something else that you've never done before and involving yourself...The environment of R-CITY for me, it's that positive environment, and what it does for you and what it does for anyone. There's no one, how good or how bad they feel, can say they don't feel good or don't thrive off being in a positive environment. It just really is for any young person. (Male E, 22)
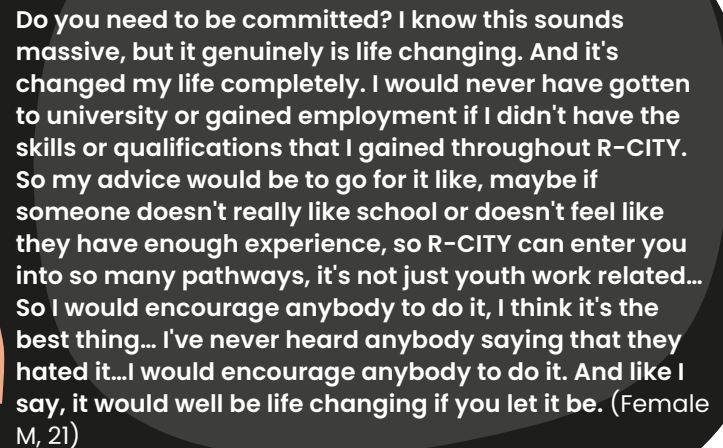
4.6 It is a risk…but life changing if you let it be *ctnd.*:

In terms of risks, being out of one's comfort zone was suggested. Whilst building skills, self-awareness and confidence are outcomes of the Programme, participants 'may feel a wee bit uncomfortable for three, four weeks… and [not] after one session, you're gonna be a fully confident you' (Male S, 25).

Other risks are presented by 'strong peer group need' (Konopka, 1973) which includes social pressure to maintain acceptable appearance to fit in, as described by one interviewee:

> **it is a risk. But the opportunities and rewards are endless, but also it can be challenging for young people…There's also the commitment of having that debater every week… Sometimes it can be challenging to young people [who] feel like they need to fit in. Because within our areas, there's a lot of social pressure in terms of style, in terms of clothing, in terms of appearance. So these are just some of the challenges that young people face…but the commitment is one day a week. So it is in terms of what you're committing to on your own and it can be tough as well.** (Male P, 23)

Finally, in addition to encountering challenging and 'uncomfortable' development experiences, commitment to the Programme, both in terms of time and to one's own self-development, is required. All survey respondent comments together with the focus group reflections build a comprehensive opinion of positive outcomes from participation in the R-CITY Programme that may be described as life changing:

> **Do you need to be committed? I know this sounds massive, but it genuinely is life changing. And it's changed my life completely. I would never have gotten to university or gained employment if I didn't have the skills or qualifications that I gained throughout R-CITY. So my advice would be to go for it like, maybe if someone doesn't really like school or doesn't feel like they have enough experience, so R-CITY can enter you into so many pathways, it's not just youth work related… So I would encourage anybody to do it, I think it's the best thing… I've never heard anybody saying that they hated it…I would encourage anybody to do it. And like I say, it would well be life changing if you let it be.** (Female M, 21)

5.0 CONCLUSION

The impact of the R-CITY leadership Programme is clearly positive and sustained beyond their enrolled time for the young participants. This retrospective study reveals that the adolescents and young adults gained **life skills** and **leadership skills** which enable them to achieve high levels of thriving and **wellbeing**, even in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Through exposure and challenge from various elements of the Programme, the participants developed **capability**, **confidence** and **resilience** to progress through life situations which they attribute as benefits they gained from their participation in R-CITY.

Within the local North Belfast context, the positive impact of going through the R-CITY Programme is clearly visible in the **high rates** of **university education** and the openness for relationships across cultural traditions. There are also ripple effects that the participants have through their positive influence on other household members, both as role models for self-efficacy and as facilitators for **breaking down** old **sectarian attitudes**. The broader ripple effect of R-CITY's Programme is also felt in the wider community through the high rate of engagement in social action and the ethos to give back.

Beyond the development of concrete life and leadership skills to achieve positive outcomes through self-regulation, the participants also developed a **self-identity** they characterise with **leadership**, **optimism**, **openness**, **independence**, **gratitude** and **helping others**. Additionally, the strong relationships and peer network the participants build over the course of the Programme, including with R-CITY staff, are significant factors that have sustained their continued development and aspirations for future achievement. The longer-term, sustained developmental gains of the R-CITY Programme evidenced in this study offer the beginnings of a positive snowball effect where early beneficial outcomes are reinforced throughout life (Murphy and Johnson, 2011:460).

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APPENDIX 1 – EPOCH measure of adolescent wellbeing

EPOCH indicators – engagement, perseverance, optimism, connectedness, happiness

1. When something good happens to me, I have people who I like to share the good news with.
2. I finish whatever I begin.
3. I am optimistic about my future.
4. I feel happy.
5. When I do an activity, I enjoy it so much that I lose track of time.
6. I have a lot of fun.
7. I get completely absorbed in what I am doing.
8. I love life.
9. I keep at my schoolwork/project until I am done with it.
10. When I have a problem, I have someone who will be there for me.
11. I get so involved in activities that I forget about everything else.
12. When I am learning something new, I lose track of how much time has passed.
13. In uncertain times, I expect the best.
14. There are people in my life who really care about me.
15. I think good things are going to happen to me.
16. I have friends that I really care about.
17. Once I make a plan to get something done, I stick to it.
18. I believe that things will work out, no matter how difficult they seem.
19. I am a hard worker.
20. I am a cheerful person.

(Source: Kern et al., 2016)

APPENDIX 2 – Life skills measure

Indicators: decision making, critical thinking, communication, team work/working with diversity, goal setting/problem solving

1. I look for information to help me understand the problem.
2. I think before making a choice.
3. I usually have more than one source of information before making a decision.
4. I compare ideas when thinking about a topic.
5. I keep my mind open to different ideas when planning to make a decision.
6. I try to see the other person's point of view.
7. I make sure I understand what another person is saying before I respond.
8. I am aware of my emotions and manage them when speaking with others.
9. I am aware of the emotions of others and consider this when speaking with others.
10. I set goals that I want to achieve.
11. After setting a goal, I break goals down into steps so I can check progress.
12. Both positive and negative feedback help me work towards my goal.
13. I can work with someone who has different opinions than mine.
14. I stand up for myself without putting others down.
15. I value knowing people of a different background (e.g. ethnicity, education, sexual orientation, disability, religious belief).
16. I stay in touch with friends or people of a different background.
17. When faced with a problem, I try to determine what caused it.
18. When solving a problem, I try to think of possible solutions.
19. I am able to find solutions to problems.

(Adapted from: UNESCO, 2013)

APPENDIX 3 – Leadership skills measure

Indicators: opportunities to be a leader, ability to motivate others, self-control, conflict resolution, ability to reflect critically, courage and confidence in own values, and continuous self-development

1. I am determined when I have a goal in mind.
2. I reflect on what I have achieved.
3. I consider myself to have good self-control in difficult situations.
4. I am known for inspiring other people to action.
5. People follow my lead easily.
6. I know my values and what is important for me.
7. I know how to access opportunities to be a leader.
8. I am known for resolving conflicts.
9. I try to do the right thing.
10. I am grateful for things in my life.
11. Helping others is important to me.
12. I have courage to call out or do something that may not popular with others.
13. I have confidence in my choices and in what I do.
14. I know what my strengths are.
15. I think about developing new skills or knowledge.

(Adapted from: UNESCO, 2013)

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