envision

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Benchmarking essential skills progress

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Introduction

We are excited to share a new report by Envision and dmh associates, in partnership with Skills Builder Partnership, which found that:

- Envision is effective in rapidly improving the essential skills of less-advantaged students, compared to typical educational settings.

- Our students' progress was six times faster than typical students in an educational setting.

Envision empowers young people from less-advantaged backgrounds to develop essential skills and confidence through making positive change in their community.

Young people from less-advantaged backgrounds too often miss out on the opportunity to intentionally develop their essential skills, and yet these skills are increasingly recognised as a key part of the solution to closing the opportunity gap – the gap in education, employment and life outcomes between them and their better-off peers.

At Envision, we deliver our structured programmes across Birmingham, Bristol, London, and - as of September '24- the Black Country. Our trained staff facilitate sessions over a 12- (Secondary) or 20- (Post-16) week period, supporting them to design, develop, and deliver an in-school social action project that will make a real-life difference within their school or college. Working towards their project goals and key milestones, and supported by a team of mentors from a local business, young people build the essential skills and confidence proven to support their education, employment and well-being.

Our first three-year impact strategy, launched in 2021, focused on building internal systems to monitor, evaluate and act on data, ensuring we consistently deliver effective programmes for young people. Through funding from The Mercer's Company, we collaborated with external evaluation specialists, dmh associates, to test the consistency and strength of our programme design and verify the positive outcomes we recorded.

This year, Dr Chris Percy, Senior Researcher, dmh associates, created a comparison group from the rich data set that Skills Builder Partnership use for their annual tracker reports. Envision is a Level 4 Impact Partner of Skills Builder Partnership: our Essential Skills Framework was developed in line with their Universal Framework, which breaks down the eight essential skills into a sequence of steps from beginner to mastery. We codified our curriculum to build these skills explicitly, and our Essential Skills Framework is the heart of our mission. This alignment between our Essential Skills definitions enabled Envision to take this benchmarking exercise forward.

Research shows that those from more advantaged backgrounds have more opportunities to build these skills, leading to higher-paying and higher-skilled jobs, and greater job and life satisfaction. Envision is one of the many impact organisations using this framework to intentionally drive skills development.

For those aiming to improve the life chance of young people from less-advantaged backgrounds, these findings have a strong message: essential skills can be developed with intention and rigour. Envision students' progress was comparable to that seen in other specialised programmes aimed at essential skill development, such as the Skills Builder Partnership's Accelerator programme. This suggests that different approaches work, with the common denominator being intentional development of these skills, a common language, and a commitment to rigour and consistency.

We hope the Envision Programme can serve as a prime example of this, demonstrating how increased focus on, and funding for, quality Essential Skills programmes can significantly benefit young people's outcomes.

Elisabeth Paulson
Chief Executive Officer (CEO)
Envision

Executive Summary

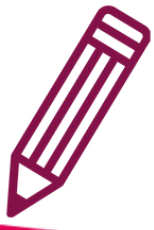
- The Envision cohort from 2022/23 reports significant skills gains from baseline to endline surveys, on average 0.1 on a scale from 0-1, with slightly higher gains in the Creativity skill area.

- Compared to publicly available data from the Skills Builder Partnership (SBP), the gains made by the Envision cohort are about six times faster than business-as-usual progress made by students in Years 11-13 from one year to the next, emphasising the significant differences between a typical school/college cohort and the disadvantaged individuals supported on the Envision programme.

- Progress made by this Envision cohort is broadly the same as the progress made in two other settings where a dedicated effort is made to improve skills. The first such setting is the SBP Accelerator school programme, analysed using publicly available data. The second such setting is a benchmark cohort constructed out of anonymised private data kindly shared by SBP, where the analysis was able to adjust for gender, age, and baseline skill score differences, as well as the different time between baseline and endline surveys. Again, there is indicative evidence that Envision progress is particularly strong in the Creativity skill area relative to the benchmark, noting caveats around a small sample size for comparison. All such programmes appear, on average, to be supporting significant self-reported skills gains compared to business-as-usual provision in schools and colleges that use the SBP survey tools.

- Turning to potential suggestions for the future, a one-off or small sample test of survey test/retest validity would be helpful to assess regression to the mean effects in the survey data. For instance, as a one-off exercise for the 2024/25 cohort, the baseline survey could be readministered a week later, being too short a period of time for meaningful skills gains.

- Potential future analysis could combine more years of data from both Envision and SBP datasets, given that small sample sizes, limited overlap in key cohort/survey characteristics, and sample variation in the current analysis have limited the ability to draw strong benchmarking conclusions. It would also be valuable to explore increasing the scope of SBP data to include longitudinal data from schools and colleges.



Context

Envision has been working with disadvantaged students aged 16/17 to improve their skills.

The first cohort of the post-16 programme that used the new outcomes framework ran in academic year 2021/22, with 42 participants providing a full set of self-assessed baseline and endline skill scores, out of a total of 51 participants with at least some reported data.

This analysis focuses on the second cohort in 2022/23, where 173 participants provided a full set of responses out of a total of 176.

The baseline skills data for 2022/23 were collected in around October and the endline data collected in around May.

A total of 24 questions were used to gather skills data, based on six questions for each of four skills categories: communication, creativity, determination, and teamwork.

The answer options for each question are based on the frequency with which a respondent reports doing a particular skill.

These questions and answer options are approximately aligned with a subset of Skills Builder (SBP) essential skills questions, providing a route to approximate benchmarking. Appendix 1 describes the questions and alignment approach.

We first analyse the progress as visible in the Envision data, then second test benchmarking against publicly available SBP data, and finally test benchmarking against anonymised privately-held data, kindly shared by SBP for the purpose of this evaluation.

The executive summary upfront additionally includes suggestions for possible future data analysis building on this methodology.

Communication

The ability to speak and listen effectively

Creativity

The ability to generate ideas and solve problems

Determination

The ability to stay positive and aim high

Teamwork

The ability to work well with others to achieve a shared goal

Progress in the Envision cohort

To support consistency in later comparisons, we report descriptive analysis just on the subset of respondents with full baseline/endline data for a particular skill area. Skill scores range from 0-1, where 1 is highest skill.

Table 1 shows statistically significant progress across all skill areas, with moderate effect sizes ranging from 0.4 (Teamwork) to 0.6 (Creativity) standard deviations.

Table 1. Envision cohort skills progress 176

Skill area	Sample size	Mean starting score	Mean progress	St.dev. of progress	Min value	Max value	P-value*
Communication	176	0.60	0.11	0.19	-0.37	0.97	0.00
Creativity	176	0.61	0.13	0.21	-0.37	0.83	0.00
Determination	176	0.65	0.09	0.20	-0.50	0.60	0.00
Teamwork	173	0.66	0.08	0.21	-0.60	0.70	0.00
Overall	173	0.63	0.10	0.17	-0.29	0.78	0.00

** P-value that progress over time is greater or less than zero (2-way paired t-test)*

Table 1 also shows that, despite average progress being positive in all skill areas, some individuals report negative progress. Table 2 identifies that this is between a fifth and a third of the cohort, depending on the skill area analysed, among participants that typically had higher starting skill scores than the overall cohort.

Table 2. Negative progress reported in the Envision cohort

Skill area	#	Proportion	Mean starting score	Mean decline
Communication	40	23%	0.75	-0.12
Creativity	41	23%	0.77	-0.13
Determination	49	28%	0.79	-0.14
Teamwork	59	34%	0.77	-0.14
Overall	43	25%	0.73	-0.10

Focusing on the overall skill scores, Table 3 breaks down the progress by quartile of starting skill score, identifying that participants with lower starting points typically make much more progress.

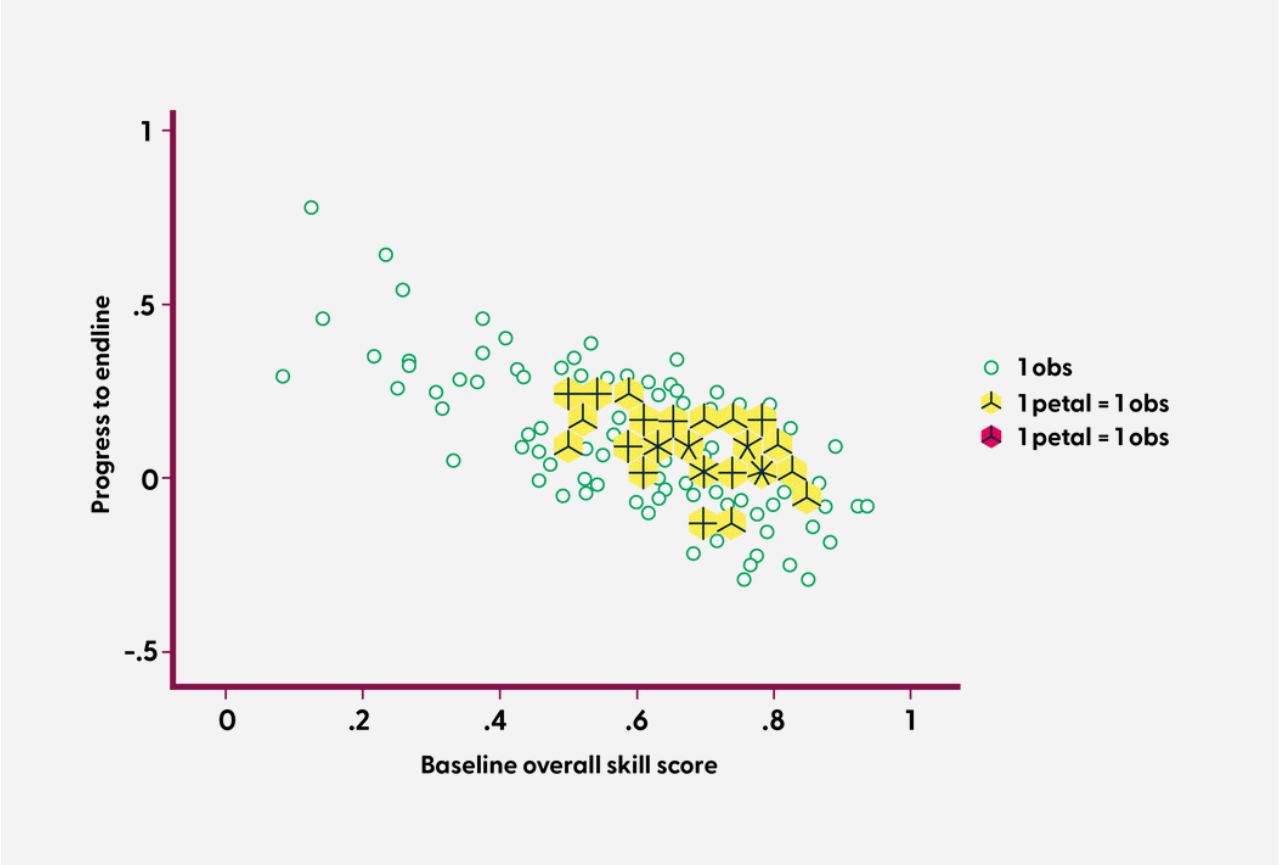
Table 3. Overall skills progress reported in the Envision cohort by quartile of starting skill

Quartile	Sample size	Mean starting score	Mean progress	St.dev. of progress	Min value	Max value	P-value*
1st	42	0.40	0.24	0.17	-0.05	0.78	0.00
2nd	44	0.60	0.13	0.11	-0.10	0.38	0.00
3rd	42	0.70	0.05	0.13	-0.22	0.34	0.01
4th	45	0.81	-0.01	0.13	-0.29	0.21	0.52

** P-value that progress over time is greater or less than zero (2-way paired t-test)*

A scatterplot of baseline score against progress score confirms the general linearity of the pattern (Fig 1). A linear regression provides a coefficient of -0.67 (p-value 0.00).

Fig. 1. Overall skill score scatterplot for Envision cohort (n=173 obs)



We identify four considerations in interpreting this differential progress by starting point, which also help to interpret the data as a whole:

(1) Rare cases of genuinely negative progress;
(2) Lack of initial understanding of skills;
(3) Regression to the mean effects;
(4) Targeted programme effects.

Rare cases of genuinely negative progress.

SBP advise that skills do not regress over short periods of time, particularly during periods of education or adolescence when young people are typically engaged in a wide range of skills-developing activities. In some SBP analyses, they recommend excluding markers of negative progress as it likely relates to some misunderstanding or a change over time that means the endline scores cannot be well compared to baseline scores. Nonetheless, it is possible in some cases that a small number of young people genuinely lose skills over time, whether due to a change in confidence, a reduced opportunity to practice them, or some other factor.

Lack of initial understanding of skills.

The Envision team explain that at the beginning of the programme some young people did not necessarily understand the skills and would often over estimate how confident they were in each area. As they progressed through the programme, they often become more aware of what it takes to master a skill and some downgrade their expectations as a result.

Regression to the mean effects.

It is also possible that self-assessed skills will be affected by how confident someone is feeling on a particular day, perhaps given recent events or even unrelated activities. Even if self-assessment skills are broadly reliable on average, some individual returns may be unusually optimistic or pessimistic at baseline, resulting in a natural tendency for regression to the mean effects to be observed at endline. Some individuals will also have unusually optimistic or pessimistic days at endline, which further introduces noise into the analysis.

Targeted programme effects.

Finally, the Envision programme and its staff particularly work to support low-end skills among their participants, such that accelerated progress would be anticipated among those with low starting points. Low initial scores or self-reflection prompted by the questions may also accelerate attention by participants in particular areas. It is also possible that it is easier to make progress in low skill areas than high ones, although this is not necessarily the case if low-scoring skill areas are accompanied by negative self-image from years of negative reinforcement from peers or the education system.

How do these four considerations affect the purpose of this analysis, being to benchmark progress made by Envision cohort participants against other young people? We cannot differentiate which of the four factors is most significant with the cohort data, but it is plausible that each plays some role. With points (1) and (4), the reported scores are broadly reliable, with trends providing important insights on how the programme operates. With points (2) and (3), the reported scores suffer from statistical artefacts. In all cases, where the feature is likely also to be present in the benchmark data, the benchmarking analysis can proceed with more robustness.

The standard adjustment for regression to the mean with the available data is to include the starting score as a control variable in a regression (or ANCOVA) set-up (e.g. Barnett et al., 2005; Linden, 2013a; Clifton & Clifton, 2019). One option for future consideration is collecting baseline data (and potentially endline data) on two or three occasions per participant, to check test/re-test validity over short periods of time when no material skills gain is anticipated. Regarding point (1), the main analyses will be run both with and without negative progress individuals.

It is worth noting that baseline skill scores were measured for those already participating in the programme rather than used as selection criteria for programme participation, removing the situation where regression to the mean effects cause greatest risk of structural bias in conclusions.

Benchmarking 1: Using public Skills Builder Partnership data

Our first benchmarking approach works with published SBP data on typical differences in skill score among older and younger students, to compare the progress reported in Table 1 against this overall "business-as-usual" progression data for the UK.

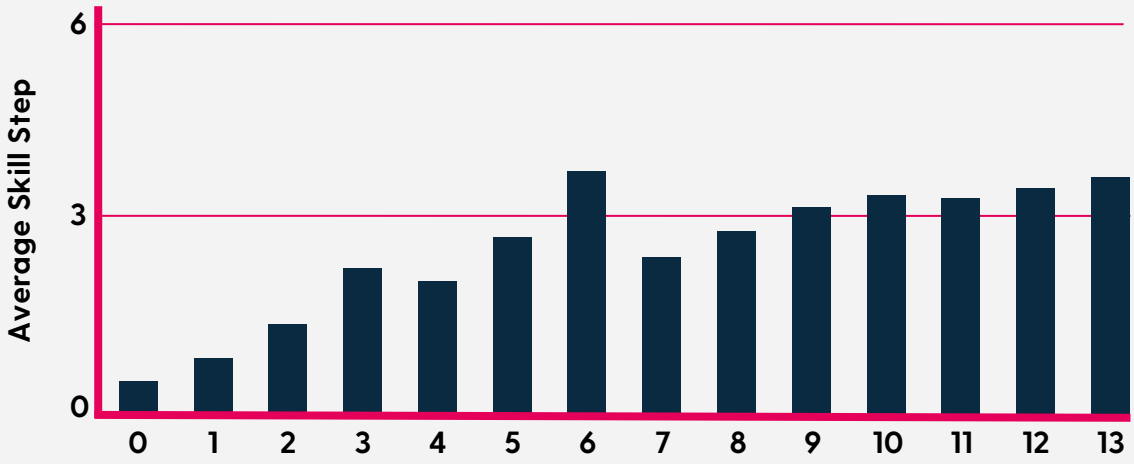
The SBP Impact Report 2023 (p.11) shows the following graph for the UK, for learners who have not taken part in a Skills Builder programme:

The starting point

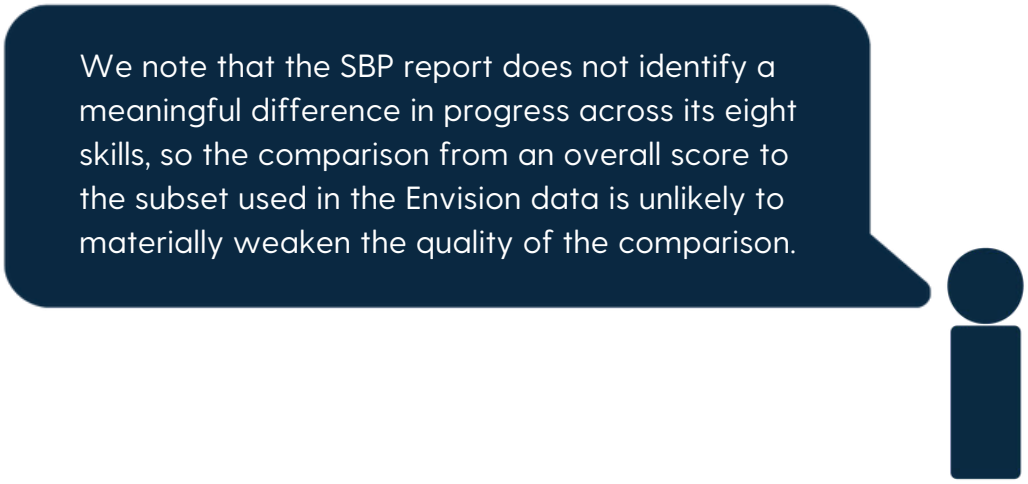
At the start of the programme, teachers complete an assessment of their classes. These assessments give us a view of how essential skills are generally built over a child or young person's time in school before a Skills Builder Programme.

What we see is that through primary school, students are making 0.57 steps of progress per year. While this consistent progress is encouraging, unfortunately the rate of progress is inadequate for children to reach the target of Step 6 by Year 6.

More concerning is at secondary school, where progress stalls and, on average, young people are making negligible progress for several years.



Envision's targeted cohort are in Year 12 (16 -17 years old) equivalent. The progress made from Year 11 to Year 12 or Year 12 to Year 13 in the SBP overall data is about 0.25. To compare this against the Envision progress, we need to normalise the 0.25 metric to the same scale as the Envision data. The 0.25 metric is based on the overall skill score, which is on a range from -1 to 15, i.e. 16 steps of unit size 1, with a range of 16. *[1]* The Envision data, by contrast, has an overall range of 1. Dividing 0.25 by 16, we identify average Envision equivalent progress of about 0.016, about six times slower progress than Envision (as reported in Table 1).

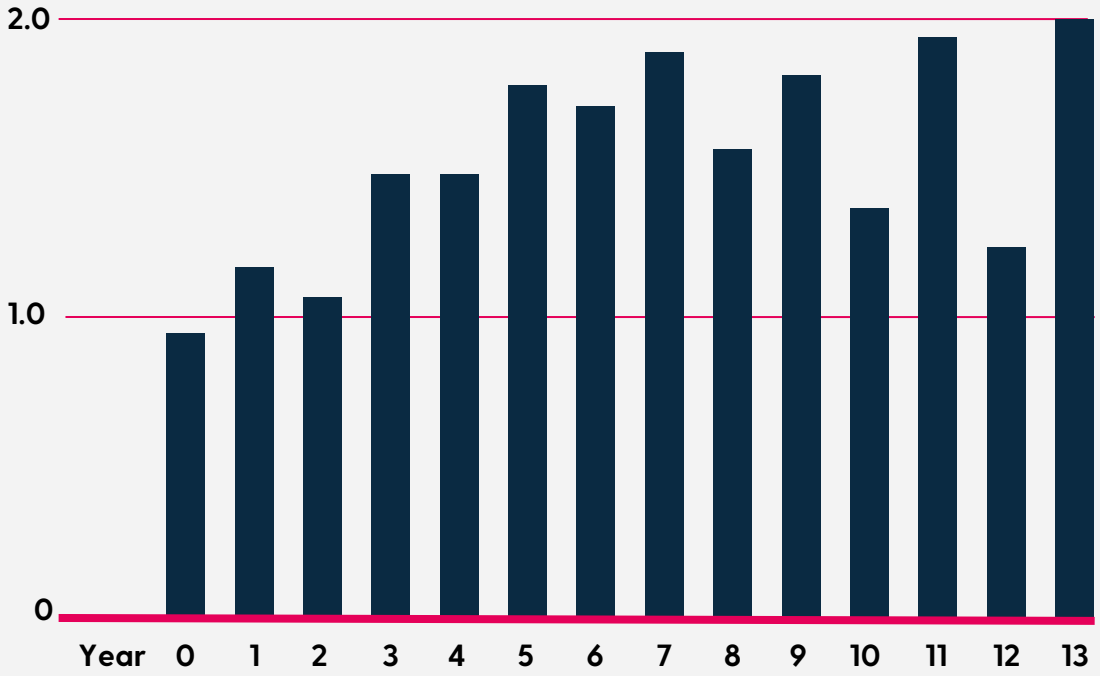


Envision data covers seven months rather than a full year, which should be the average time gap in SBP data. In general, as shown above, older students have higher average scores, so this comparison penalises Envision. However, the SBP data would include the summer holiday when academic performance typically drops, a pattern which may also apply to reported skill scores. It is unclear from these data how these effects might balance out and no adjustment is currently proposed, although further work could investigate this.

Relative to a "business-as-usual" setting, Envision participants appear to report progress significantly faster than would be expected for their age group. SBP does however also investigate targeted provision that has higher progress rates. In SBP Accelerator schools, there is nearer to 1.5 steps of progress per year from Year 11 to Year 13 (see chart overleaf). With the same normalisation, we would see average progress in Accelerator schools of 0.09, effectively the same as the 0.10 identified in the Envision cohort, acknowledging the uncertainties in both calculations and comparisons. Subject to caveats, this analysis suggests a comparable level of average progress achieved by Accelerator school participants and Envision cohort participants.

[1] Sum the value of each step score 0-1 based on reported frequency of the person achieving that step across the 16 skill steps for each skill area, before minusing one. All steps are treated equally. Average across the eight skill areas to get an overall score.

Progress by year group for Accelerator schools



Accelerator schools likely differ in their approach to skills interventions, but each typically has initially similar support, such as a one year programme of support with the SBP team to develop skills trainers, train teachers, and develop a whole school, skills-embedded method.

Benchmarking 2: Using Skills Builder Partnership private data

SBP were generous in making available an anonymised student-level data extract of skills scores to support this benchmarking exercise, as an initial experiment to explore the potential for such benchmarking to lead to different insights relative to the publicly available data. Analysis using this sample is referred to as the "Benchmark cohort".

The benefits of using student-level data are to mitigate a number of the caveats from the public data benchmarking:

- The business-as-usual and Accelerator school cohorts may be materially different from Envision's cohort. For instance, one may have lower/higher baseline scores, which may be harder/easier to progress from for this cohort. There may also be differences in gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background or other characteristics that skew the analysis.

- Given that students typically report improvements over time in a business-as-usual setting (except for the Year 6 to Year 7 transition), the time gaps between survey points are particularly important and these time gaps may be different between the Envision cohort and the Accelerator school data.

- There may be differences in the specific skill steps queried by Envision that do not follow the general pattern. Differences in question phrasing/scoring should not materially affect the analysis, since we are examining progress data in both cases, although we cannot test for this analytically with the current data.

- We know little about the business-as-usual provision (which is likely to vary widely) and the Accelerator school provision, making it hard to be confident in the utility of benchmarking against Envision's programme.

SBP identified a dataset corresponding to young people aged approximately 15 to 21 who are engaged with providers "Working with young people". Such providers are typically working with young people selected for a skills intervention of some sort by a social impact intervention. They are more likely to have repeat measures over time, making them a better comparison to Envision's circumstances than those in general education with no specific selection criteria known.

This set of SBP data has 599 young people with at least two questionnaire responses.*[2]* However, only 66 have a full set of responses to the questions corresponding to the Envision skill steps, such that we report analyses for each skill area, where sample sizes can be larger.

This cohort of young people also have significant differences to the Envision cohort. For instance, relative to the Benchmark cohort with relevant data, the Envision cohort generally have lower baseline skill scores, are more gender balanced and slightly younger students, and typically have a much larger gap between their baseline and endline surveys. Table 4 provides the relevant summary metrics, including all Benchmark data with complete answers to at least one of the four skill areas analysed by Envision (see Appendix 1 for details). Overall progress between the cohorts is broadly the same in the descriptive data.

Table 4. Envision and Benchmark cohorts – Descriptive comparison

Variable	Envision cohort	Benchmark cohort
% male **	54%	27%
% female **	41%	72%
Approximate age	17.0 (0****)	17.3 (1.6)
Days between surveys	212 (0****)	82 (87)
Baseline overall skill score***	0.63 (0.16)	0.77 (0.13)
Overall progress***	0.10 (0.17)	0.09 (0.10)

*(..) marks st. dev.; * Envision n=176; Benchmark n=172; requiring a participant to have a full set of data for at least one of four skill areas; ** Do not sum to 1 due to other/not specified; *** Where available in full, i.e. n=173; 66; **** everyone approximated to same value*

[2] We remove 2% of questionnaires done by the same person on the same day, as we are unsure which one to use. Where students have three or more questionnaires, we choose the initial one and retain the next one that is nearest in absolute distance to the time gap of Envision (approximately 7 months or 210 days). One person had two surveys exactly equidistant from that cut-off. In this case, we retained the later of the two. As a data cleaning note, the "answer_value" was given precedence over the "score" on the rare occasions where the two conflicted.

An initial check confirms similar levels of regression to the mean (RTM) evidence in the Benchmark cohort as the Envision cohort. For instance, the linear regression coefficient of baseline overall score against progress score is -0.41 (p-value 0.00; n=66). 15%-20% have negative progress across the four skill areas (n=100-130). Using the Linden (2013b) metric, the RTM effect below a cut-off of the maximum skill score of 1 is 0.003 for the Envision cohort and 0.004 for the Benchmark cohort on the overall skill score (both have p-values for non-zero RTM effects of 0.00). However, the means being regressed to are unlikely to be the same for the individuals between the Envision and Benchmark cohorts, since the baseline scores are typically lower for the Envision cohort and participants are not drawn from the same population. For this reason, we include an interaction term between Envision cohort status and the baseline score, as well as the baseline score itself.

A comparison of progress between the Envision and Benchmark cohorts is conducted on a per skill area basis, including control variables for baseline score (including interaction with Envision cohort status), gender (allowing three values), days between surveys (allowing a squared term), and age (as categorical values), requiring a full set of responses within the relevant skill area, fitting a linear regression model with robust standard errors to predict the endline score. As discussed in section 2, two variants are reported: one with all qualifying participants and one just among those reporting non-negative progress. The results are given in Table 5.

Table 5. Comparison of progress between Envision and Benchmark cohorts

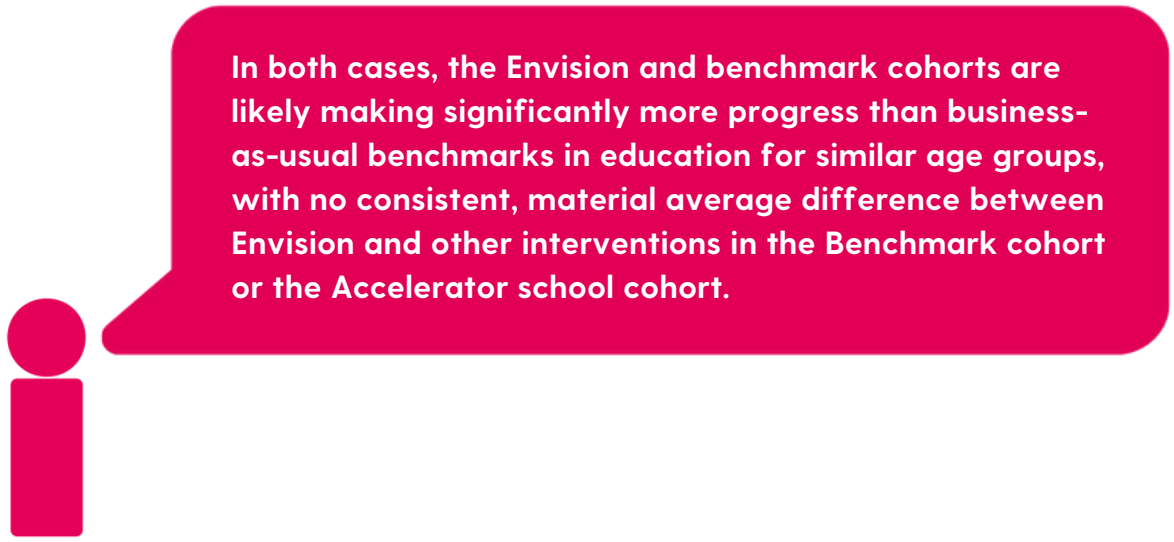
Variable	All participants			Neutral or positive progress participants only		
	N	Co-eff (p-value)	^2R	N	Co-eff (p-value)	^2R
Communication	306	+0.03 (0.69)	38%	243	+0.01 (0.91)	58%
Creativity	291	+0.15 (0.04)	38%	233	+0.19 (0.01)	54%
Determination	290	-0.08 (0.31)	29%	222	-0.08 (0.36)	49%
Teamwork	273	+0.10 (0.23)	33%	194	+0.04 (0.53)	56%
Overall	239	+0.11 (0.15)	38%	187	+0.01 (0.87	58%

** Co-efficient reported for Envision cohort participation dummy variable*

By this analysis, adjusting partially for differences between the Benchmark and Envision cohorts, only one of the differences is statistically significant at the 5% level or better (Creativity, with directionally higher progress in the Envision cohort). The small sample sizes also place pressure on the analysis, especially among the Benchmark cohort with its smaller sample and greater variation in age and time between surveys.

Indicatively, when all participants are analysed, the Envision cohort sees slightly more progress than the equivalent Benchmark cohort, comparing like-for-like in terms of gender, age, starting score, and time between surveys, as far as is possible in the restricted sample size. When negative progress participants are excluded, as advised by SBP and reflecting the Envision programme view of initial over-confidence or mis-interpretation among some participants, about half the variance in endline scores is explained by the estimated model. Participating in the Envision programme is typically weakly directionally positive, except on Determination (where it is directionally negative) and Creativity (where there is a clearer positive picture). Overall, given the mixture of results across skill areas and the small sample sizes drawn from different, imperfectly adjusted populations, there is effectively no clear and consistent difference in progress between the two cohorts.

This tailored benchmark analysis supports the high-level comparison with public data on the Accelerator school programme.



All such programmes appear, on average, to be supporting significant self-reported skills gains compared to business-as-usual provision in schools and colleges that use the SBP survey tools.

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This report was authored by Chris Percy, with support from colleagues across Envision, Skills Builder Partnership, and dmh associates ltd

Appendix 1. Envision and SBP question alignment

Envision Essential Skills Framework		Skills Builder Universal Framework	
Communication	I speak clearly to individuals and small groups I do not know	**Speaking step 2**	I speak clearly to individuals and small groups I do not know
	I use eye contact and body language to show I am listening	**Listening step 6**	I show I am listening by how I use eye contact and body language
	I ask questions to show I am listening and deepen my understanding	**Listening step 7**	I show I am listening by using open questions to deepen my understanding
	I use facts and examples that support my points to engage listeners	**Speaking step 7**	I speak engagingly by using facts and examples to support my points
	I use tone, expression and gestures to engage listeners	**Speaking step 9**	I speak engagingly by using tone, expression, and gestures to engage listeners
	I plan ways to adapt what I am saying depending on the different possible responses of listeners	**Speaking step 11**	I speak adaptively by planning for different responses of listeners
Creativity	I explore problems by thinking about the pros and cons of possible solutions	**Problem solving step 5**	I explore problems by thinking about the pros and cons of possible solutions
	I combine different ideas to generate new plans	**Creativity step 5**	I generate ideas by combining different concepts
	I explore complex problems by seeking extra information through research	**Problem solving step 7**	I explore complex problems by building understanding through research
	I create solutions for complex problems by generating a range of options	**Problem solving step 9**	I create solutions for complex problems by generating a range of options
	I develop ideas by using a range of techniques, such as mind-mapping and asking myself questions	**Creativity step 8 and 9**	I develop ideas by using mind mapping // I develop ideas by asking myself questions
	I develop ideas by considering different perspectives	**Creativity step 10**	I develop ideas by considering different perspectives
Determination	I keep trying when something goes wrong and think about what happened	**Staying Positive step 4**	I keep trying when something goes wrong and think about what happened
	I take a positive approach to new challenges	**Aiming High step 4**	I work with a positive approach to new challenges
	I order and prioritise tasks to achieve goals	**Aiming High step 7**	I set goals for myself, ordering and prioritise tasks to achieve them
	I identify the right resources and support to achieve goals	**Aiming High step 8**	I set goals and secure the right resources to achieve this
	I look for opportunities in difficult situations, and adapt plans to use these opportunities	**Staying Positive step 9**	I look for opportunities in difficult situations, and adapt plans to use these opportunities
	I create plans that include clear targets to make progress tangible	**Aiming High step 11**	I create plans that include clear targets to make progress tangible

Envision Essential Skills Framework		Skills Builder Universal Framework	
Teamwork	I create plans that include clear targets to make progress tangible	Aiming High step 11	I create plans that include clear targets to make progress tangible
	I know how to explain my feelings about something to my team	Leadership step 1	I know how to explain my feelings about something to my team
	I work well with others by being on time and reliable	Teamwork step 2	I work well with others by being on time and reliable
	I work well with others by taking responsibility for completing tasks	Teamwork step 3	I work well with others by taking responsibility for completing my tasks
	I contribute to group decision making whilst recognising the value of others' ideas	Teamwork step 7	I contribute to group decision making, whist recognising the value of others' ideas
	I recognise the strengths and weaknesses of myself and others in my team	Leadership step 7 and 8	I recognise my own strengths and weaknesses as a leader // I recognise the strengths and weakness of others in my team

** Where an Envision question maps to two SBP questions, the average of a person's response to those two SBP questions is used to compare against the Envision response.*

Answer option coding

Envision response	SBP response	Coding for this analysis
I never do this	Almost never	0
	Rarely	0.25
I do this sometimes, but not often		0.4
	Sometimes	0.5
I do this half the time		0.6
	Often	0.75
I usually do this, but not always		0.8
I always do this	Almost always	1

Appendix 2. Envision Essential Skills Framework

envision	Skills Builder PARTNERSHIP
Communication	Listening, Speaking
Creativity	Problem solving, Creativity
Determination	Aiming high, Staying positive
Teamwork	Leadership, Teamwork