

Programme Review & Impact Report

2024



THE
POLAR
ACADEMY

Now in its 11th year, The Polar Academy has worked with 210 young people, who prior to our programme were struggling from a range of mental health challenges due to a variety of reasons including abuse, neglect, bereavement, bullying.

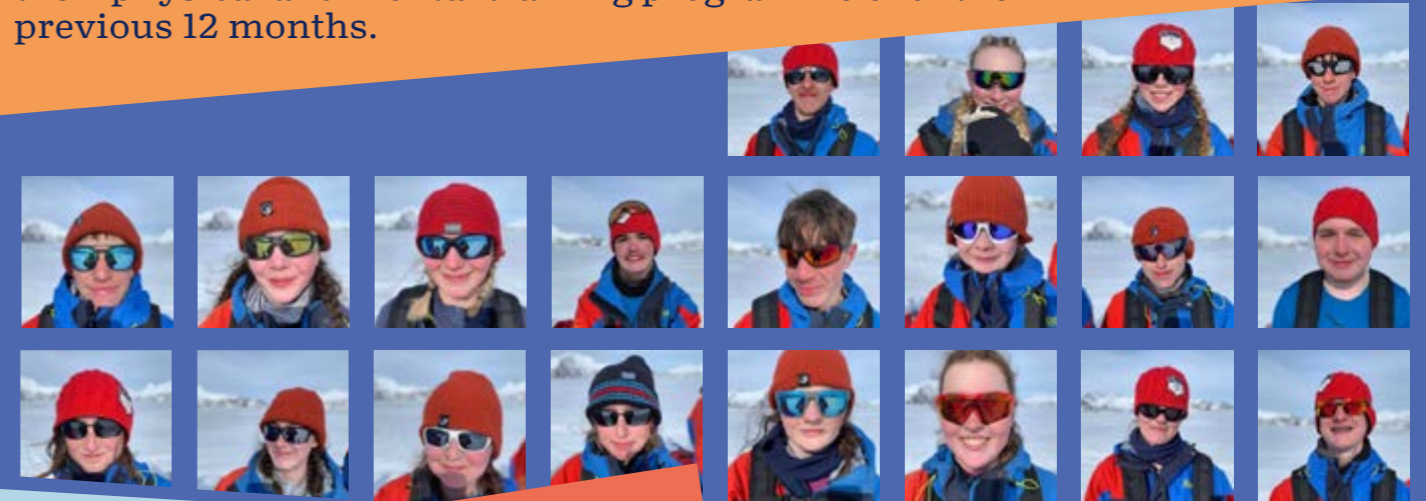
Taking them from darkness, we work with invisible teenagers for 12 months on an intense mental and physical training programme that sees them become full of self-confidence and belief, going on to inspire their family, friends and community, for life.

Our programme is fully funded through our charitable and corporate partners and patrons; we just ask our young people to pass on their personal stories to others at the end of their experience as part of our inspiration through exploration philosophy.



2023/2024 Programme Overview

At the end of March 2024, two teams of teenagers from Bucksburn Academy in Aberdeen and Braeview Academy in Dundee returned from a successful winter sledge hauling expedition to Arctic Greenland having completed their physical and mental training programme over the previous 12 months.



Selection weekends

Glenmore Lodge

Our cohort of 30 started their journey with a selection weekend at Glenmore Lodge, together with a parent or carer to select the teams for our expedition and leadership groups.

a feeling of accomplishment. This is a critical part of our programme – helping the youngsters start to “believe” in themselves.

Activities included underwater immersion trials, knot tying, rock climbing, canoeing, stand-up paddle boarding, an introduction to navigation, map reading and hill walking. The final task was a verbal presentation on their background and life, to The Polar Academy team, often the most challenging part for the young people.

Parents and carers play a critical role at the start of the programme, attending the selection weekends and demonstrating commitment to their young people and to the programme through their own participation.

We saw youngsters who were shy at the start, change over the weekend, leaving at the end with a renewed sense of purpose and confidence and



10

youth-led Greenland expeditions (2014 - 2024)

3/4 million

members of the community reached 2014 - 2024

210

participating families to date

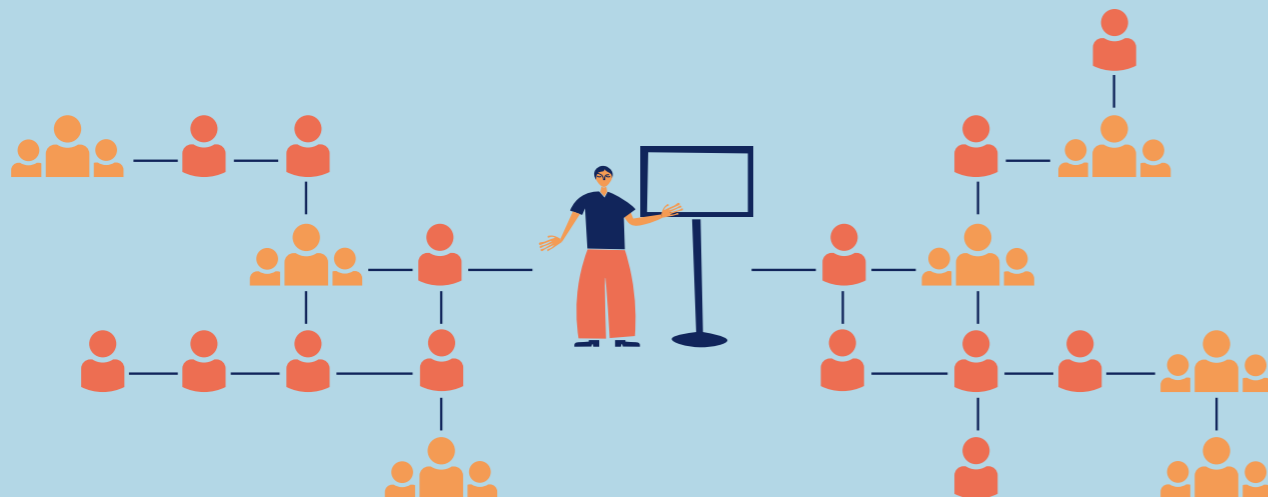
210

Graduates of The Polar Academy OVER 10 YEARS

14

school and teacher participants to date

To date we have worked with 210 youngsters directly, and over 3/4 million people in their communities.



Weekly training

Cardio and strength training continued weekly at the schools between August 2023 and March 2024. Sometimes parents and siblings also joined in. Each week the bar was raised in terms of fitness goals and endurance of the training programme.

In October, the team also attended a lecture at Edinburgh Napier University by our extreme sport physiologist and experienced a cold chamber to understand the importance of eating, dressing and looking after each other in extreme conditions.



Expedition training

In October 2023, the two teams ventured to the great Scottish outdoors in the Cairngorms to complete their training ahead of the Arctic expedition.

They all received a Bronze National Navigation Award which counts towards their SQA Accreditations.

They learned to work together as a team and received various lectures and on-hand experience in expedition and survival skills, spending 3 nights hiking, camping, cooking and climbing some Munros.



Tyre hauling endurance training

We ran 3 tyre hauling sessions between January and March 2024, with the young team covering up to 30 kilometres during all day sessions.

It was very challenging physically for the team, but they had built up their fitness well during the Insanity training and proved to be ready for the expedition.

The final tyre hauling session at St. Andrews saw the youngsters being joined by parents, teachers and some of partners and patrons as well as many graduates from our previous 9 expeditions.

Greenland departure

Mid-March 2024, after a year of selection, skills and fitness training a total of 20 teenagers from Bucksburn Academy, Aberdeen and Braeview Academy, Dundee along with 2 teachers, 1 doctor and 8 guiding staff set off for East Greenland following emotional goodbyes with their families.

We flew from Glasgow via Iceland and onto the island of Kulusuk. From there it was a further 10-minute helicopter ride over the sea ice. It was a perfect day, the sea ice, icebergs and mountains were beyond anything the young team had ever seen before.



Winter sledge hauling expedition – East Greenland

Prior to our arrival, an unprecedented 5-day rain and warm weather event at the start of March meant skiing was out of the question and we were reliant on walking with micro spikes attached to our boots.

Initial temperatures were down to around -25° and for the first couple of days a northerly wind made it feel quite a bit colder, but everyone was supplied with the correct clothing and kit for the conditions. The first day was spent sorting food and equipment and packing the big sledge bags and then the next day we headed north from Tasiilaq across the sea ice, covering about 10km to the first camp with careful decisions being made on appropriate camp sites due to the frozen surfaces.

The 10-day expedition saw us finding a series of Polar Bear footprints, exploring up to a small glacier snout and gaining views across to the Greenland ice sheet. Our scientific experiments involved using a LiDAR camera to gather rock and lichen images, the recording of micro plastic emissions and checking devices which were placed out the previous summer as part of a long term, 10-year project to record ground temperatures. Some of our team will have

the opportunity to present these findings to Oxford and Cambridge universities in the summer.

At the end of the expedition our team were able to take part in cultural visits in Tasiilaq, including a dinner at the youth centre and a visit to the museum. The additional time in Tasiilaq before heading home also enabled further progress to be made with shared youth projects to help with Greenlandic youth opportunities, employment, tourism and cultural exchanges.



Graduate, peer, parent and teacher feedback

The Polar Academy gives young people better physical, mental and emotional wellbeing with stronger connections to their family and the wider community. We aim to positively empower them for the rest of their lives.

ANECDOTAL FEEDBACK TO DATE

- The young people are more engaged in class, have improved attendance and increased self confidence
- Regular demanding exercise starts at the selection weekend, leading to the youngsters feeling emotionally and physically well, positively empowered and ready to lead the expedition in Greenland.
- They are no longer shy and uncertain
- They are willing to try out new things and new pursuits
- They mature into thoughtful young adults, able to design their own path in life, many going onto university
- They develop leadership qualities and life skills that support them in the workplace environment



23/24 impact outcomes

We speak to our young people at the end of our programme to understand the impact it has had on them. Across 5 key metrics we measure self-confidence, self-esteem, family dynamics, life skill development and how they feel about their future. Respondents from our 23/24 programme reported the following:

Self-confidence and self-esteem

more than **doubled** on average across our participant group over the course of the programme

100%

of our 23/24 participants have said



- they have **clearer aspirations** or feel more confident reaching goals once school education has ended
- the Polar Academy Programme has had a **positive impact on family dynamics** both during and after
- they feel they have gained **new life skills** during the programme

Economic impact

Our economic impact model considers the positive impact of The Polar Academy programme on the future of the young people's lives and the further impact on the economy in terms of savings in social care, employment benefit and positive contribution to the economy through employment. We currently estimate a **return of 2.75** on programme investment and funding within the first year of our participants graduating.

23/24 Parent feedback

"Thank-you to all the financial sponsors and patrons - you have changed lives for the better and forever".

"The experience has made our daughter confident in her future choices. She is leaving school soon, attending college for a year and now has travel plans prior to trying to join the police force".

"The Polar Academy gives fantastic opportunities to our leaders of tomorrow. It has been a privilege being on the journey to see what a positive impact the programme has had on all attendees, seeing them all grow in confidence, improving their resilience, communication and teamwork".

"For us The Polar Academy has completely changed our family for the better."

"It's been great to feel like a part of a large family experiencing this with others".

"It's building blocks for life - it teaches them they can face fears and it teaches them they can do absolutely anything in life. No education can deliver this. This is really special."

"They have taken our son from a nervous, socially awkward kid who had low confidence and never went out and transformed him into a strong confident young man with a good group of friends and the world at his feet".

23/24 Young participant feedback

"It was the best experience of my life".

"The Polar Academy changed my life a lot. I'm staying on at school, I have a job at the weekends, my friendships are stronger than ever, and I have started coaching an under 12 football team"

"I can't thank The Polar Academy enough for everything it has done for me. It has helped me in so many ways and I don't know if I would be here without their help".

"After feeling lost and unheard and invisible, to being able to know who I am and have confidence in myself and in my skin and having a strong bond with the team".

"The Polar Academy has transformed me from a socially anxious kid who struggled to speak up in conversations to a kid who is able to talk in front of hundreds with confidence and have a clearer outlook on my future ambitions."

"I'm up out of my bed and I go walking at night with my friends and the gym in the mornings. I'm focused more on my health".

Supporting The Polar Academy

Our programme is fully funded to every participant and their family on our programme. We only ask that they share their stories to inspire other through exploration after their experience with us.

We gain funding through Charitable Trusts, Foundations, Corporate Partners, individual Patrons and events.

If you are interested in supporting the young people we work with and help transform their lives forever, please contact Craig Mathieson at

craig@thepolaracademy.org



To find out more about The Polar Academy, please visit our website at www.thepolaracademy.org or follow us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or LinkedIn.

To support our growing impact on invisible kids, please contact craig@thepolaracademy.org



The Polar Academy is a charity registered in Scotland no. SC044605.