

Evaluation of the Peer Mentoring Scheme, Aimhigher Lincolnshire  
and Rutland

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## **Evaluation of the Peer Mentoring Scheme**

### **1. Background**

The Institute for Access Studies (IAS), Staffordshire University, has been commissioned by Aimhigher in Lincolnshire and Rutland to evaluate the peer mentoring initiative (Study Buddies), funded through the programme and operating in a number of schools within the area.

The scheme has been in operation since 2004/5 when 2 schools were involved. In 2005/6 the number of participating schools has risen to 13. The aim of the scheme is to involve older students in the mentoring of young pupils in specific subjects such as maths. However this basic premise has been adapted within individual schools and the operation may vary from school to school.

### **2. Method**

In order to explore the impact of taking part in the scheme two schools were selected by members of the Aimhigher team to take part in the evaluation. Both schools were approached and provided with details about what participation would involve. Both agreed to take part in the evaluation. To obtain pre and post activity data it was envisaged that researchers would visit the school on two occasions; at the beginning of the project and again, towards the end of the school year in April/May in order to assess impact. However, while the first visits were made as planned, we were unable to gain access to both schools for the second visit. It must be emphasised that the issue of gaining access to schools and their pupils in order to evaluate initiatives is becoming an increasingly problematic one and we have experienced similar difficulties in Staffordshire. This has clear implications for the evaluation of the mentoring scheme as we were unable to talk to staff and pupils *after* they had taken part to gain their perceptions of impact. To try and overcome this problem we have, where relevant, included data drawn from the evaluation of the Aimhigher team. As a result, the evaluation draws on interviews with teaching staff (6 interviews), support staff (2 interviews) ex-students (2 interviews) and pupils (4 group interviews with mentors and 3 group interviews with mentees) in three schools. Of the participating schools, one is situated in an urban area, one in a rural area and one in the coastal strip. They are all 11-18 schools. Data collected from these interviews was reviewed independently by two researchers from the IAS, who then came together to discuss the main themes arising from this material. These are discussed below.

Although data on achievement was not available at the time of writing this report, participating schools provided Aimhigher with a short summary of their involvement in the initiative. The data for these schools is summarised here:

- 89 mentors were said to be working with in excess of 380 mentees. (Exact figures were not given as some respondents said mentors were working with whole classes in some subjects.)
- 5 schools used their own sixth formers as mentors, 4 used those from another school sixth form, 2 used Year 11 students.

- The majority rewarded mentors for their involvement either in the form of cash (8 schools) or by voucher (1). Two schools rewarded mentors with an excursion ranging from a day out to a 3 day visit to London. One school felt that it was important that mentors did not receive any remuneration.
- The key focus of the initiative was academic for 9 of the schools. A further 2 felt that it had both academic and aspirational aims, and one hoped the scheme would impact on behaviour.
- In 3 of the schools accreditation was available for mentors.
- Mentoring took place in the following subjects: Maths, English, Science, Physical Education and Business Studies.
- Mentors were said to work in a variety of ways ranging from acting as Teaching Assistants in one school to one to one sessions in other schools and from working in the classroom to working in a separate room with targeted students.

The following approaches were identified by respondents as effective:

- Selective targeting rather than working with whole classes.
- Work with more vulnerable pupils.
- Work with younger students to support the transition to secondary school.
- Liaison between mentor and class teacher before the unit of work takes place.

The feedback also incorporated teacher's perceptions of impact:

- One school reported that there had been a positive effect on Year 9 and 11 pupils.
- One school felt that all pupils had benefited.
- One school reported that their mentors had begun to mentor voluntarily within another school.
- One school felt that mentoring pupils in a second school had reduced barriers between the two. In addition both mentors and mentees were said to have benefited from participation.
- The scheme was mentioned as an example of good practice in one school's OFSTED report.

### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1 Operation

As mentioned above, the scheme appears to operate differently according to the school. The flexible approach adopted by the Aimhigher team to this and other activities is one of the positive factors emphasised by stakeholders (see programme evaluation). Details of each peer mentoring scheme within the 3 schools visited by the research team are given below:

	<b>School A</b>	<b>School B</b>	<b>School C</b>
<b>Main focus of scheme</b>	Improving behaviour	Academic	Academic
<b>Subject areas</b>	English and Maths	Business Studies, English and Maths	Maths

<b>'Reward' to mentors</b>	No payment made, but mentors receive training at a local hotel	Payment made to mentors	Payment made to mentors
<b>Accreditation for mentors</b>	Yes	Key Skills Award	No
<b>Pupils involved</b>	6th formers mentoring younger pupils	6 <sup>th</sup> formers mentoring younger pupils	6 <sup>th</sup> formers mentoring Y11 students
<b>Targeting</b>	Mentees chosen by teaching staff because they would benefit from mentoring support.	Mentees identified as borderline C/D pupils	Mentees identified as borderline C/D pupils

### 3.2 Enablers

- A good mentor was described by mentees as confident and well known to them.
- Mentees have more confidence with their mentors if they have been known to them in the school as they are familiar with them and they are perceived as being on the same level and therefore more approachable.
- It was felt that knowledge of the scheme spreads by word of mouth, and that pupils either see their friends being mentored or have been mentored themselves.
- Support from senior level staff within the school for the scheme is a key factor.
- Support from teaching staff in the subjects involved.
- Flexible approach of the Aimhigher team allows the school to 'tweak' the scheme to suit their particular context, with the proviso that it remains within programme's remit.

### 3.3 Barriers

- The **subject** in which mentoring takes place is not necessarily a barrier but can affect impact. For example, in one school Business Studies mentoring was felt to be more successful than Maths because fewer sixth formers felt confident enough in Maths to volunteer to be mentors. Mentees also reported differently according to subject: in Business Studies they preferred to ask the mentor, in English the teacher. This could relate to how they perceive their mentor, but also to whether they see the subject as having 'fixed' answers which were either right or wrong and asking their mentor might put them in a 'funny position'.
- **Time** is needed for the relationship between mentors and mentees to develop.
- **Preparation** – mentees prefer to know beforehand why they are being singled out and what they are going to be involved in. If this does not happen pupils may feel anxious, or that they are 'dumb'.
- **Workload** – in one school it was felt that extra work was involved for teaching staff and this was why the scheme had been restricted to 3 subjects. In a second school, however, the scheme was not felt to

involve any additional work, although if it was extended to include more disruptive pupils then this might become burdensome.

- Teaching staff interviewed felt that some teachers regard their classroom as a '**closed domain**' and would be reluctant to allow mentors in. This was not regarded as an issue in any of the schools involved in the evaluation however.

### 3.4 Benefits of involvement

#### Mentees

- **Increased confidence:** Teachers and mentors report that mentees become increasingly willing to speak up in class and to ask questions of the teacher:  
*"The little lad that I mentor, when we first went into the classroom he never put his hand up, and he never tried to say sentences out loud. But now he talks, he's always got his hand up trying to communicate with the class."* (Year 13 mentor)  
Mentees also confirmed that they felt more confident when with their mentors and could ask them questions they could not do in class.
- Pupils who have been mentored frequently want to become mentors themselves, because they view the experience as a positive one.
- **Changed attitude to subject:** Mentors feel that pupils they are working with in Maths say they cannot 'do' the subject, but once it is explained to them find they can and have a changed perception of the subject. Mentees also felt that their attitude had changed – even if they felt they were still struggling, they could see that they had improved.
- **Improved attitude to work:** mentors feel that mentees are more willing to try to do something, rather than just saying they cannot and giving up. Mentees felt that they got on with their mentors well (this was particularly important if they did not have a positive relationship with their teacher) and many expressed a desire to improve their grades. Teaching staff also reported a more positive attitude in mentees.
- Mentees felt that the individual attention from the mentors was very beneficial, in that they sometimes felt teachers were unable to provide this one to one support.

#### Mentors

- A number of mentors felt that involvement would **look good on their CV or UCAS application:** *"So many people have good grades now. You have to have something that's different to make it look special, to help you get into uni"*. Accreditation was felt to be particularly beneficial in this respect.
- In one school mentors were handpicked for confidence and communication skills, went through an application process and were interviewed. This is a valuable **learning process** for students.
- Involvement is seen by mentors as being valuable in terms of their own revision. Teachers also felt that explaining to others would act to **consolidate mentors' own knowledge.**
- Mentors felt that their own **confidence** had increased.

- In some examples, mentors were felt to be underachieving and were selected for this reason. Other mentors were selected specifically to provide them with teaching experience. In all 3 schools the benefits for mentors were considered to be equally as important as those for mentees. As a result mentors were selected with these aims in mind.

### *3.5 Good practice*

Although flexibility was viewed positively by those involved, a number of factors can be identified that support good practice.

- It is possible that some staff development might be beneficial if teachers view their classroom as a 'closed domain'.
- Mentors report that feedback from teachers on impact is valued.
- Continued liaison between mentors and teaching staff.
- It is important that the scheme is 'sold' to potential mentees in a positive manner – the school is looking for good things from them and picking someone who has done well to help them.
- Equally important is preparation for mentees prior to involvement – explaining why they are involved and what this will be like.
- Support for mentors from staff within the school. This is particularly important if mentors feel that the scheme is not working for a particular mentee, or that their contribution is not needed.
- Mentors working with smaller groups of mentees rather than a whole class was felt to be beneficial.
- Linking activities – in one school mentored pupils are being asked to attend Summer School. As discussed in the programme evaluation, a coherent structured programme of activities for targeted students is felt to maximise impact.
- Accreditation for mentors.
- Reward to mentors – not necessarily a cash payment, but some kind of reward for their contribution.
- It appears that benefits from involvement in the initiative accrue to both mentors and mentees. Consideration is, and should continue to be, given wherever possible to ensure that mentors also fit Aimhigher selection criteria.
- Evaluation relates to the stated aim of the initiative – in some schools the focus may be geared more towards aspiration than recording predicted and actual grades. There is the opportunity for the feedback from the first cohort of students to provide feedback to inform future practice.
- Creating opportunities for mentors and mentees to feedback on the activity.

## **4. Returning Student Ambassador Project**

### *4.1 The project*

One of the schools involved in the evaluation had pioneered a returning student ambassador scheme based on peer mentoring activity. Eight Year 13 pupils were selected as 'ambassadors' to talk to Year 9 tutor groups about their decision-making in relation to post-16 progression. The eight prospective

HE students then keep in touch with the tutor group 3 times a year (including at least one personal visit) until their experience of university is complete, and the school pupils are in Year 13.

#### *4.2 Aim*

To give pupils a realistic picture of what university is like.

#### *4.3 Impact*

Both ambassadors are first generation entrants to HE. The ambassadors felt their role was to 'tell it like it is' in relation to the HE experience. This was particularly important to one of the ambassadors who was initially reluctant to take part because she did not want to 'big it up' as she was not 100% sure of entering HE herself. The positive relationship ambassadors have with both the school and the teaching staff involved has been an important factor in their willingness to participate in the scheme.

The feedback they had received from tutor groups has been positive so far and pupils were interested to hear about university from a student's point of view. Tutor groups had been particularly keen to hear about student accommodation, how they lived (e.g. what sort of meals, part-time jobs, social life, etc.) and finance issues. Photographs of accommodation, campus areas, etc. were felt to be particularly useful.

Pupils from the tutor group were very positive of the experience:

*"It's good to get a real view of university. If people dress it up it doesn't tell you about the bad bits and you can't prepare for them".*

*"This scheme will help me to make a decision about university by giving me more of an idea what it's like and what you can do."*

Pupils were equally interested in things that had not gone so well; one of the ambassadors had withdrawn from university but had continued to visit the school. The ambassador had withdrawn because she felt she had chosen the wrong course. This has been identified as one of the key reasons why young working class students 'drop out' of HE (Quinn et al, 2005). The following remark from one mentee illustrates the value of the initiative:

*"It was helpful to hear about someone dropping out. I know now that it's important to think carefully about what I choose to study."*

Particularly important to pupils was the fact that they knew the ambassadors, had 'seen them around' and valued their experience because they were the 'same as them'. This constitutes 'hot knowledge', information from a trusted, familiar source rather than information from teachers which was regarded as outdated because they had all attended university 'years ago, and it's all changed now'.

#### *4.4 Suggestions from pupils to improve practice*

Although the activity is already regarded as successful, pupils gave the following ideas for improvements:

- Extending the scheme to include pupils who had followed a work based route; embarked on an apprenticeship rather than entering university – *“we want to hear about all the options that are out there”*.
- More face to face contact was called for – one visit per term was suggested.
- Pupils would like to see more photographs and visual materials in relation to the students’ universities and experiences of HE.

## **5. Conclusion**

Clearly both schemes are proving effective. Teaching staff, mentors and mentees themselves all agree that confidence has increased and attitudes to work have improved in those pupils involved in the peer mentoring scheme. In addition benefits are also evident for mentors. The returning student ambassador scheme, although in its early stages, also appears to have positive impacts for mentors and mentees. In addition, the scheme potentially offers a counter argument to those who feel that the picture of HE provided by Aimhigher is too ‘rosy’. Feedback from schools involved indicates that they would be keen to continue these initiatives without financial support from Aimhigher. Finally, the importance of linking activities, of involving pupils in a structured, coherent programme of activities within school should be emphasised.

## **6. Reference**

Quinn, J., Thomas, L., Slack, K., Casey, L., Thexton, W. and Noble, J. (2005) *From Life Crisis to Lifelong Learning: Rethinking Working-class ‘Drop-out’ from Higher Education*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation