



Future Me Online Mentoring

Evaluation Report 2020

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Introduction

Future First works across the UK to help build, engage and activate thriving state school alumni networks, to ensure that all young people have access to relatable role models, trusted mentors and meaningful social capital.

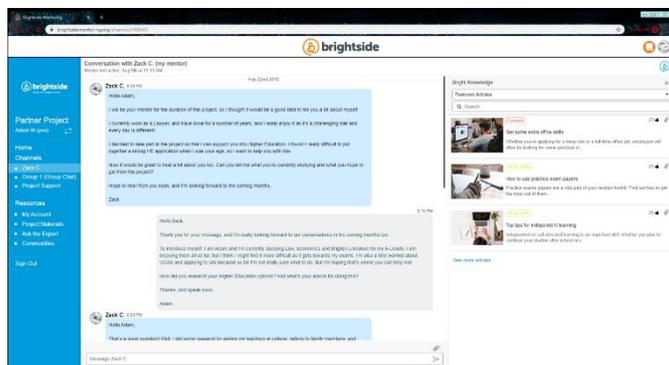
In the 2019/20 academic year, Future First successfully launched the [Future Me mentoring programme](#), facilitating in-person mentoring sessions in two schools. This received overwhelmingly positive feedback and we were able to apply the learnings to adapt training and resources to be delivered online. In the summer term of 2020, in response to school closures and the impact on disadvantaged young people, we launched Future Me Online Mentoring. Using the platform, guidance and expertise of online mentoring charity Brightside, we intended for the programme to allow us to continue to provide students with relatable role model mentors, to support with decision making about future pathways, even when this support was not possible in-person.

This report summarises the key evaluation findings, incorporating feedback from volunteer mentors and school contacts as well as students who participated.

We are incredibly grateful to the generous donors who made this project possible, including (but not limited to) Nick Strong, the Pears Foundation, Taylor Wessing LLP and Lindsey McMurray.

Project Overview

Over eight weeks, Year 11 and Year 12 students from 14 schools took part in the online mentoring programme. Using Brightside's online mentoring platform, mentors and mentees interacted via direct message. Safeguarding was a priority throughout. Mentors were DBS checked, and the platform has moderation built-in. Personal details were not exchanged at any point.



Mentors and mentees were required to attend an online webinar preparing them to participate. Through this session there was opportunity to become familiarised with the online platform, as well as training covering effective communication, how to respond to safeguarding concerns and target setting.

In advance of the programme launching, students completed a matching form, providing us with information about their career/education aspirations, their hobbies and interests as well as their favourite subjects at school. This information was used to match them with mentors who had similar interests and/or had jobs in industries that students had registered an interest in.

Below is an excerpt from one conversation between a mentor and mentee:

Mentee: *“So lets say I went decided to go on a specific path and even took it through university, if I did change my mind or wanted to change would it still be the same difficulty level if i had decided that particular pathway at an earlier stage like before uni perhaps? Or would you say it would be harder to pursue another path from the beginning after taking another one for so long?”*

Mentor: *“If I understand this question correctly then neither of those things are necessarily true. You do not have to start at the base level of a subject. For example, a friend of mine who was on my two year acting diploma is going to study criminal psychology at uni despite no prior experience in the field. Another example is my older sister who is doing a conversion degree at a law firm meaning she will get a university equivalent degree in law and still hold her current degree in philosophy. A person can do as many degrees as they like so long as they have the funds. It may be more difficult to pick up a subject you have never done before but it's certainly not impossible and there are certainly transitional skills to be taken. Psychology and arts have a lot of cross over as both is about how humans think and express.”*

Evaluation Methodology

Students completed surveys at the beginning and at the end of the programme. These were designed to measure the knowledge they gained and skills they developed as well as students' confidence in their own abilities and motivation to work hard at school. Alongside this, we also collected feedback from mentors and school contacts who offered insight into how the students' developed their skills and confidence over the eight weeks. School contacts also provided insight into student engagement during Covid-19 and barriers to access for some students.

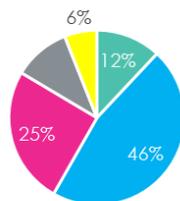
Because the end of the programme fell at the beginning of the school summer holidays, we encountered some challenges in securing exit data from participants. Nevertheless, there are still clear findings from responses to the exit survey as well as qualitative data taken throughout the programme.

Findings

Knowledge about future pathways

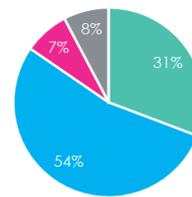
Taking part in Future Me Online Mentoring improved students' understanding of the skills they need to pursue future pathways. At the start of the programme **58%** said they knew what skills they needed to take the pathway they were interested in when they leave school. By the end this had increased by **27%** to **85%**.

Baseline: I know what skills I need to take the pathway I am interested in after school



■ Strongly agree ■ Agree
■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Disagree
■ Strongly disagree ■ I don't know

Exit: I know what skills I need to take the pathway I am interested in after school



■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Disagree

Knowledge of future pathways was also a common theme when students were asked how mentoring helped them and **88%** said conversations with their mentor helped them think more clearly about their future.

"My mentor helped me to understand the process to get to where I want to go. Also, my mentor made me consider and think about all of the options I have for a career path."

"I understand now that I should not be so stressed about the future as there are so many pathways possible especially for people who love to gain knowledge and I know that I am one of those people."

"It showed me different career paths that I had previously never considered. Also, it helped reassure me that my financial background won't hinder me in my pursuit to uni and higher education, by showing me all the support that is available. Most importantly, it pushed me to take a more proactive role in researching and deciding my future."

Similarly, when asked about the main topics they discussed with their mentees, mentors commonly referred to pathways advice:

"Explored all options after high school. Career paths in their preferred fields without going to uni. CV and personal statement writing tips."

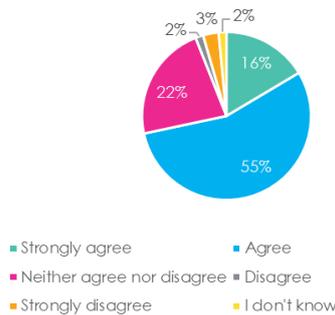
"Applying to university, how to find out about university courses, medicine and how to best make a strong application."

"Chosen careers and routes into them, having an alternate career path in case your first one doesn't work out, working on developing professional skills through college, and completing a CV."

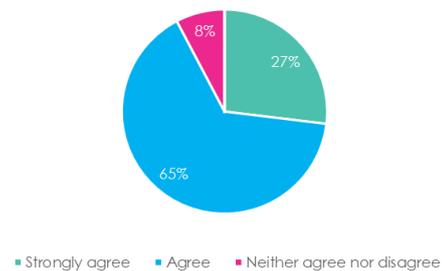
Confidence

Students' felt more positive about their futures because of Future Me Online Mentoring. The percentage of students stating that they felt positive about their future increased from **71%** to **92%**, with no students disagreeing with the statement by the end of the programme.

Baseline: I feel positive about my future



Exit: I feel positive about my future



60% of mentors told us they believed their mentees felt more confident as a result of taking part in the programme.

Students told us that:

"It helped me to see different pathways and opportunities that I did not know existed or had not thought of. Due to the range of opportunities, it made me feel more relaxed and secure with what I wanted to do."

"It has been able to boost my confidence; I have more of a better idea on what my next step should be."

Social capital

We asked students if they had anyone they could talk to about their next steps after school, in order to better understand the level of support they had access to. At the start of the programme 52% agreed that they 'know people I can call on for employment or further education advice'. By the end of the programme this had increased to 69%, with no students strongly disagreeing and only 8% disagreeing.

Mentee experience

96% got on well with their mentor

92% learnt a lot from their mentor

92% said they enjoyed the mentoring programme

88% said their mentor understood their needs

Students were asked, on a scale of 1-10, **how likely they were to recommend Future Me mentoring to a friend.**

The average response was **7.88**.

Students told us:

"I definitely found this experience useful and very helpful [...] I really appreciate it and I am more confident about the decisions that I need to make when it comes to the future."

"I just want to say a big thank you for everything during this mentoring programme; it has really helped and I have managed to take a lot away from this experience. It was very useful and helpful and I can't say thank you enough."

Mentor experience

90% mentors found the training helpful

73% mentors would recommend Future Me Online Mentoring to a friend

We asked mentors what skills they were able to develop as a result of the mentoring programme. **76.7%** told us they improved their mentoring skills and **70%** reported an improvement in communication skills. Mentors also demonstrated an increased understanding of the needs and concerns of young people. **56.7%** told us that their empathy with young people had increased as a result of taking part, and **60%** reported greater awareness of the issues facing young people today.

Mentors told us:

"I think it is a brilliant way to engage and support young people in their career/education choices."

"It is a fun experience and it's nice to help out the younger generation."

"I still feel very positive about the aspiration of the programme and it feels more useful now more than ever, given the impact of COVID-19 and the complications many young people now face regarding their future options."

David, mentor

I am the Enterprise Adviser at my old school so I am heavily involved in the careers programme and I saw the Future Me Mentoring Programme as an extension of that role. I really enjoy giving back to my old school and the one area that is always challenging is organising 1-2-1 mentoring for our students. This programme provides the ideal platform, for both the mentor and, perhaps more importantly, the mentee.

The programme has not only allowed me to share my experiences and provide advice, but also made me think about how we set up young people up for success when they make their next career moves. I have also reflected on my own career path and how having a programme like this available at the time I was making my decisions about education vs work would have been hugely beneficial.

My mentees have been incredibly engaging during the process, asking a lot of questions and were keen to learn as much as they could over the eight weeks of the programme. I have seen them develop, think about what they need and want to know, then take clear action and set themselves some next steps.

Mirusaine, mentor

I signed up for the Future Me Mentoring Programme when I heard about it as it sounded like a great experience to use what I know to help other students. When I was a student and making decisions in years 11-13, I had many questions and not many answers/guidance, especially being part of the first generation to go to university. Having gone through that experience, I felt as if I would definitely be able to help students in a similar position.

My mentee asked some really thought-provoking questions which made me think about the decisions I have made, past and present. My mentee was looking into future options post-school and was considering university degrees as well as apprenticeships. Answering questions about university came easily to me as this was something I have experienced. When it came to apprenticeships, I did not have any prior knowledge of how they worked but I was able to use resources provided by the programme and do some research myself. As I have experienced the research process before, I knew what to look out for and after providing my mentee with some tools/options, we were able to discuss them in further detail.

To consider the different career pathways, we made a venn diagram of what he enjoyed, what he was good at and what would be useful in the future. This allowed my mentee to reflect on the subjects he enjoys and think about whether he would enjoy studying them further.

I believe this experience has provided my mentee with a better understanding of what to consider when looking into future career pathways and higher education. For me, this opportunity has allowed me to critically evaluate the decisions I have made and improve my communication and research skills. I would definitely recommend this opportunity to anyone who wants to give back to the community and help students think about their futures.

Learnings and recommendations

Student recruitment

This programme took place in unprecedented and uncertain circumstances, with the majority of students working from home, some with limited access to technology and outside of their ordinary routine. It is unclear whether there was a direct relationship between school closures and engagement in the programme. However, from conversations with school staff it is clear they found it harder to contact students during school closures and **85%** reported that engagement with Future Me Online Mentoring was consistent with students' general engagement in school.

School staff tell us they found it more challenging to recruit students when they were not physically attending school. **28.6%** of school staff reported that there were students who were interested but there were barriers to taking part and **14.3%** cited practical issues in contacting students due to school closures. Future programmes could ensure greater take up through targeting more schools from the start of the programme, providing as much notice as possible to give schools time to recruit and including parents and carers in the process.

Mentor recruitment

Conversely, some mentors appear to have found volunteering online easier to access. **83%** of the mentors who submitted an evaluation form had not previously volunteered through their old school's alumni network and **13.3%** hadn't volunteered at all. The flexibility of online mentoring allowed volunteers with more rigid work schedules, as well as those not in the same geographical location, to contribute more easily.

Access to technology

The reliance on technology created complications for some students. For those with limited access to technology at home this meant they were not able to engage in the programme as consistently, sometimes taking longer to respond and sending fewer messages. To aid with this, now that the majority of students are again attending school, schools could be required to provide a space once a week with IT provision for students to participate.

In one instance a student's access to technology was limited by a parent as a behaviour sanction, restricting how much they could respond to their mentor. To avoid this circumstance in future it would be useful to notify parents and carers of the expectations of student's participating, including the importance of having access to technology either at home or at school.

Resources

Feedback on resources provided was mixed, with some mentors and students finding a suggested structure useful, and others finding this too restrictive. To allow for a more flexible approach, future programmes could include greater focus on planning in the first two weeks. This could include students and their mentors formulating a plan for the eight weeks and setting SMART targets to achieve them. Resources provided can then be used when appropriate to support the targets rather than being perceived as prescriptive.

Sustainability and legacy

Current restrictions, as well as the fact that the programme ended during the summer holidays, mean we cannot yet measure whether mentors will provide further support. However, three mentors have been in touch with Future First to offer to continue to support their mentee. We are working with schools to see what may be possible under safeguarding restrictions. Our next step is to consider how resources can be shared to support

school contacts running mentoring programmes independently, and considering how we can apply the learnings from this programme to continue to promote alumni mentoring in schools.

- All messages and resources from the programme archived for students to access
- **86** volunteers received mentor training
- All school staff can access the resources developed to continue to support their students

Conclusions

Future Me Online Mentoring connected students at 14 secondary schools across the UK with mentors to provide advice about their future pathways through online messaging. Using the Brightside platform, students interacted with their mentors, sending an average of 1.8 messages a week.

Our findings show that by the end of the programme students who participated had an increased understanding of the pathways available to them, as well as the skills required to achieve them and the practical steps they need to take. Many students created action plans and used spreadsheets to make detailed plans for their next steps. As a result, their confidence also increased with students now feeling more positive about their futures.

Since the project has ended a number of volunteers and students have been in touch to offer thanks and personal testimony. At least three mentors would like to offer further support to their mentees and all of the schools who participated would be interested in future programmes.

This programme highlights the potential of online mentoring as a tool which allows volunteers to engage flexibly, and students to access support remotely. There is significant potential to expand on this to provide support to greater numbers of students, perhaps through a blended learning approach now the majority have returned to school. We are looking into ways to make this a reality.