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‘Edu Champs’

An Evaluation of the Outcomes of the Widening Participation Scheme with Suggestions for the Future

Katie Smith

Department of Education

University of York

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Background to the Project

The Education Champions in Schools (Edu Champs) programme was funded through the University of York's departmental widening participation initiative fund. It ran for the first time as a pilot activity across the 2018/19 academic year.

The key aims of the scheme were to encourage students to apply to university and address any obstacles that they felt would stop them from doing so. In addition to this, it was also important that mentees had a realistic picture of what life at university was actually like, and a chance to talk with a mentor about any worries they had about going to university. It was also an aim that students should apply to Education/Social Science courses at university, however this was not the main priority as encouraging a wider conversation about the application process and life at university were the main concerns that mentors could help with.

The project was staffed by Dr Amanda Naylor and Dr Sally Hancock based in the Department of Education at the University of York. PhD student Katie Smith assisted them in a role as research assistant throughout the project, helping to create pre and post scheme surveys for the participants involved, as well as running focus groups for the university students who had been involved in the scheme to provide important feedback. The transcriptions from these focus groups, in addition to the Qualtrics responses, have been split into key areas that will be outlined in the following report.

In total we received 6 responses to our pre-mentor survey and 2 to the post-mentor survey. The focus groups were split into 2 sessions, allowing feedback to be collected from 7 university students, or 'mentors' who had taken part and had different experiences throughout.

Successes

The following section will detail the successes of the project from the perspectives of the participants, but following that will also highlight how the students who were involved felt about the positive aspects.

Mentees:

All of our mentees that filled in the pre-mentor survey described themselves as studying for A/AS Levels. 50% noted that they had other responsibilities alongside their studies, such as helping to look after the home or earning extra income through working. Two thirds of our respondents said that their plans after their current studies were to go to university, and of those only one participant had decided on the institution and subject they wished to study.

This scheme was aimed at encouraging students to study Education at university, and one of our mentees stated that was what they wished to choose as their subject choice. Of our initial responses in this survey, only one mentee had expressed an interest in applying to a Russell Group university.

There were a few positive responses to what our mentees were most looking forward to about university, including *"meeting new people", "more spare time*" and "*more freedom*" which was encouraging to see before they had even began the scheme. However, there were a lot of things that the mentees were not looking forward to about university, including the "*long journey*" (from a mentee who was looking at studying in London) "*staying at uni", "money", "workload*" and "*the distance away from home*".

Only a third of our mentees classed themselves as "confident" when asked about how equipped they felt about applying to university, and only one felt that they were "well informed" about how they felt about life at university.

The key demands from our mentees before they met with their mentors was mostly concerned with finding out about life at university and what it is like from the perspective of a student, and from discussing how our mentors interacted with our mentees we can say with confidence that this was one of the most positive outcomes of the scheme.

In the post-mentor survey, both respondents noted that they were confident in how to apply to university (a key aim of the project) and that they were both well-informed about life at university (another important aim). Hopefully this extended to all mentees on the scheme, as judging from the accounts of our mentors it did seem to have worked in those two key areas, however as only 2 mentees responded to the post-survey we cannot prove this.

The areas that were most useful for mentees in the post-survey included knowing what life is actually like at university, as well as knowing the differences between different universities and which courses would potentially be most useful to apply for depending on aspirations later in life.

<u>Mentors:</u>

Taken from the focus groups with our mentors there were a lot of positive outcomes from the scheme. One mentor noted that they had gained valuable skills from the project: *"listening skills, mentoring skills"* and others mentioned the advantages that taking part would mean for their CVs. It is therefore safe to say that for the mentors, this scheme is excellent for improving their employability, a key advantage to consider with all the expectations that students have during their time at university, as employers are looking for more than a degree but the experiences alongside that whilst studying.

More selflessly though, the idea of 'giving back' was mentioned a total of 20 times in the focus groups with mentors. One mentor stated: "*I thought when I was in that position applying for university I didn't have a clue what I was doing, so I thought going back and helping people and like support them so that they have some sort of idea what they were doing".* Another noted that: "*to diversify institutions like this you have to have people who*

are representing them" and felt that the mentors had done a good job of fulfilling that role. The idea of having been in the position the mentees was in was expressed several times, including *"I was in that position"* and "*we're actually students who have been through it, we offer more. We offer a real perspective".*

Mentors overwhelming felt that they had made a positive difference with the scheme and enjoyed working with their mentees, one particularly positive quote from a focus group was *"I think even if you've only helped one person that's a huge thing".* The mentors felt that by taking part in this project that they were filling a gap that schools and colleges did not provide in terms of the kind of information that is available about university life. One mentor said *"I feel like if I'd had like someone from my area come in and talk about their experience of moving away to uni, or like just going to uni in general when they didn't know the people there like it probably would have been a lot more helpful. So I feel like I could have offered that kind of voice, like that would be relatable to students making that decision."* Another expressed how useful the scheme would have been to them if it had run during their key decision making point in life: "*guess I did it because...when I was making the decision to come to uni or not, no one in my family had been to uni so I didn't have a lot of support, apart from what like the college offered which wasn't a lot".*

Areas for Improvement

Mentees:

Perhaps in order to measure the successes of the project overall, greater emphasis could have been placed on getting mentees to fill out both pre and post surveys. If the scheme were to run again this could easily be fixed, as possibly one of the reasons why the surveys were not filled out in great number was to do with the timings. For a first time however, it is positive to note that we did receive some responses that were on the whole positive about the scheme.

One mentee noted in their post-mentor survey that "*the scheme was a bit disorganised, but overall it did help*". Moving forward, mentees noted that they wanted the scheme in future to

be "*more organised*" and "*more well-structured*". This is certainly something that could be fixed by having a timetable for mentors to adhere to (as will be discussed under the next heading, as organisation was a key theme that came up in the focus groups with the mentors). Organisation did appear to be the only area for improvement that was expressed by our mentees, which is good as it means that the aims of sharing knowledge about university life and the application process were met.

Mentors:

Most of the comments alluding to being an area to improve on from our mentors did relate to the overall organisation of the scheme. One mentor noted that *"I wouldn't say it's been the easiest experience".* Organisation and timing issues were mentioned a total of 13 times collectively, so it is safe to say that this is the main area to look at improving should the scheme run again. Falling under this were issues with mentors getting paid, and it was suggested that the timesheet system that the university uses should be explained in the initial training session as some found it confusing. Ultimately all mentors did receive full pay after chasing up this issue, therefore moving forward perhaps a resource in the shape of a Google Doc might be helpful for mentors to refer to at a later date. This resource would also solve other problem areas, for example a timescale in how to communicate with schools (mentioned in more detail in the final paragraph of this section) or a rough timetable for when mentors should be aiming to meet with mentees. Mentors did suggest this to take the form of *"an email or PDF"* in the focus groups, however a central Google Doc would more than likely be welcomed.

In terms of organisation, it was suggested that mentors in the future should have a chance to schedule in a small meeting with an academic on the scheme if they were feeling stuck or at some sort of limited point. This could easily be looked into organising, time permitting, via a Doodle Poll or similar

Another key area to improve on in future relates to the DBS check that is vital for our mentors to go into schools and colleges. It was mentioned 6 times between the 2 focus group sessions, with comments such as "*underestimated how long a DBS would take…"* and other

mentors noting that the DBS check was the main obstacle that held them up in the initial stages of the project, which most likely contributed to it not being viewed as very organised by some of the mentees.

Issues with the schools themselves is also a key area that would need improving if the scheme were to run again, particularly in relation to communication between mentors and the schools they worked with. A suggestion made by the mentors in one focus group to address this issue was being told a rough timescale of how long to wait for a school to respond to any email correspondences, for example 2 weeks of no reply would mean to take another step. Another suggestion was to ask the academics who were running the scheme to make the initial contact to make things look a little more official, as some mentors felt that at times they were not taken seriously 'just' being university students, and that this impeded their progress. One mentor felt that in future ties with schools should be maintained so that the next set of mentors have the option to go into a school or college that has already taken part in the scheme, and that in doing this the issues about getting into schools/colleges initially would be solved.

Summary

Having looked at the difference in responses from mentees, although few in number, it does seem that having the mentoring sessions played a role in helping them to learn about university application, as well as getting a taste of what university is like. The mentors felt that the most valuable part of the scheme was the aspect of having a 'real' student talk about university, answering questions that open days and college/school resources did not cover. A lot of these questions are best answered through anecdotes and experiences of someone who the mentees can and did relate to, therefore whilst the scheme may not have recruited any students in particular it has done a great deal in putting young minds at ease!

There does seem on paper to be a lot to improve in the future, however when broken down it is really only 3 areas that need to be fixed and all 3 of those areas are certainly minor. One mentor noted that *"I think it would work better in the second year because then we'll know what needs to happen and we'll have more deadlines, whereas this year I just feel like it's*

been a practice", which is encouraging as it implies that all the more difficult parts of the project have been identified, and could be fixed if it were to run again from the feedback of our mentees and mentors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this project was a success despite a few areas that would need to be improved. Issues that would be beyond the control of those on the project would relate to the timescale of the funding that is essential for the scheme to be run. For example, if the funding was announced or available at a different time, then mentors could express and interest and get their DBS over the summer break. This would then mean that by the time it was autumn term at university, they could go into their school/college before term started (York has a fairly late start date compared to schools and colleges) and then be on their second visit when returning home for the break before Christmas.

If the funding remains to be inflexible, then it is likely that issues surrounding timing will reoccur if the scheme runs again. Other than that, all other areas for improvement could easily be fixed, making the project extremely worthwhile for both mentees and mentors.