

Psychology Mentoring Project

Schools Report

Summary

- The aims of this project were to give A-level pupils an idea of the realities of attending University and what studying psychology is like at degree level. It also aimed to give undergraduate psychology students the chance to gain experience and develop skills vital to their later careers.
- The project involved a number of mentoring sessions led by eight Royal Holloway psychology undergraduate students, working with two schools. The sessions included a presentation to all Year 12 A-level pupils in the schools, small group sessions, and a campus visit.
- Questionnaires and focus groups were used before and after the mentoring sessions to help assess the project's impact on mentors and mentees.
- Pupil mentees largely reported the project as a positive experience, which helped them to broaden their understanding of psychology and university, and develop academic skills. The project questionnaires looked at their attitudes to higher education, self-esteem and self-efficacy, but there was no change over time compared to pupils who did not take part.
- Mentors reported that the project had been a positive experience, which gave them experience of working with young people and to develop communication skills. Over the project period they increased in self-efficacy scores and in two areas of psychological understanding.
- The psychology mentoring project will start again in the next academic year with some slight changes being made to reflect the feedback from school staff, mentees and mentors.

Introduction

This was a new educational research project based at the Department of Psychology, Royal Holloway, University of London. The project recognised the need to prepare undergraduate entry students before they actually enter higher education, preferably while still studying A-levels. Research suggested that new university students find that there are some differences between what was involved in studying psychology at school and what it is like at university. The project aimed to tackle this through a mentoring scheme, with current university students working with A-level pupils. Cross-age mentoring has previously been used effectively to promote higher education aspirations within the government initiated AimHigher Associates scheme.

The mentoring scheme was also designed to support current psychology undergraduates' development of employability related skills and support their learning within psychology. The mentoring project was funded by the Higher Education Academy and Royal Holloway University.

Participating Schools and Student Mentees

Student mentees were Year 12 A-level psychology pupils (aged 16 to 18 years) from two local secondary schools. Since the project aimed to widen participation in higher education, mentees were largely selected by the schools' psychology A-level teacher based on their meeting widening participation criteria.

School 1

In this school 10 students, 7 female and 3 male, took part as mentees. Four mentees met at least one widening participation criteria including needing to be re-engaged with academic work in preparation for A-level examinations or being in receipt of the 16–19 bursary, and 1 student met at least 2 widening participation criteria.

School 2

This school included 10 student mentees, who were all male. Here 12 mentees fit at least one widening participation criteria such as being on the C/D borderline, and 8 students met at least 2 widening participation criteria. In the context of psychology, including a high proportion of male pupils was also considered to be an additional way of engaging with an under-represented group at degree level.

Student Mentors

Eight undergraduate psychology students, seven female and one male, from Royal Holloway University acted as mentors. Most mentors were in their second year of study, and one was in their third year. All mentors received Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks before the project began and took part in a compulsory training session to prepare them for their role as mentors. They received training in child protection, active listening skills, and in preparing for the mentoring role within the school setting.

Mentoring Activities

In both schools the project began with the mentors introducing themselves, and the realities of studying psychology at university through a presentation to all Year 12 pupils studying psychology. After this initial session the mentors held small group sessions with their student mentees in which they covered pre-planned topics as well as topics suggested by the pupils. The session schedule can be seen below. Mentees were also invited to visit the university campus for a day.

In School 1, six small group mentoring sessions were run and mentees were able to attend the majority of mentoring sessions: of the eight possible sessions (including the initial presentation and university visit) the mean number of sessions attended was six. In School 2, it was only possible to run four small-group sessions due to scheduling difficulties; of the six possible sessions (including the initial presentation and university visit) the mean number of sessions attended was four.

Mentoring activities schedule (*School 1 only).

Mentoring Session	Description
Presentation on psychology at degree level	• Talk by mentors to all pupils to introduce studying psychology at University.
Mentoring session 1	• Introductions between mentors and mentees. • Getting to know each other • Helping mentees set goals for the project
Mentoring session 2	• Understanding what it is like to study a psychology degree including: grade requirements and types of courses.
Mentoring session 3	• Study support around an A-level topic • Going through an exam paper with mark scheme
University campus visit	• Listen to research talks, take part in research and have a campus tour.
Mentoring session 4	• Open session with topic to be agreed with mentees e.g. how to write CVs and personal statements.
Mentoring session 5*	• Reviewing mentees goals and planning their presentations showing their experience in the project.
Mentoring session 6*	• Mentees' presentations on the mentoring experience

Benefits for Pupil Mentees

Impact

- School 1 – in a questionnaire on perceived impact mentees were very positive about the project, with all saying they agreed or strongly agreed it had been a positive experience, and to feeling that it improved both their confidence and knowledge in psychology.
- School 2 – on the same questionnaire mentees had more mixed views, with over half saying they agreed or strongly agreed that it had been a positive experience while the rest either disagreed or were undecided.
- Mentees completed questionnaires at the start and end on self-esteem, self-efficacy and attitudes to higher education. No changes were seen compared to students who did not take part in the project.
- For more information about the project's impact on mentees see below table.

Responses to open questions

- Answering a series of open questions gave mentees the chance to indicate in greater detail how the mentees felt they had benefited.
- Benefits highlighted by mentees were similar across the two schools and included learning about university (e.g. different types of universities and understanding what university life is like) and improved study skills.
- Mentees emphasised that the experience helped improve their understanding of psychology, for example one mentee wrote "my psychology knowledge has been broadened, they explained things in ways school hadn't."
- Some even indicated that the experience helped them make decisions about their higher education plans, for example another mentee wrote that: "[the experience] helped me to decide what I wanted to do at university and the type of university I wanted to go to."

Summary of mentees' responses to statements about the impact of mentoring sessions

The mentoring sessions...	School 1					School 2				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Helped my confidence in psychology	11.1%	88.9%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	45.5%	27.3%	18.2%	9.1%
Helped my knowledge in psychology	22.2%	77.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	45.5%	36.4%	9.1%	9.1%
Have shown me different ways to study the material	11.1%	88.9%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	9.1%	36.4%	36.4%	9.1%	9.1%
Helped my approach to studies in other subjects	0.0%	55.6%	33.3%	11.1%	0.0%	0.0%	9.1%	45.5%	36.4%	9.1%
Have given me ways to tackle my studies in general	11.1%	55.6%	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	27.3%	36.4%	36.4%	0.0%
Proved helpful in managing my time	0.0%	55.6%	33.3%	11.1%	0.0%	0.0%	18.2%	54.5%	27.3%	0.0%
Made me feel more positive about attending classes	0.0%	77.8%	22.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	45.5%	36.4%	18.2%	0.0%
Increased my friendship network	0.0%	44.4%	33.3%	11.1%	11.1%	0.0%	36.4%	36.4%	18.2%	9.1%
Has been a positive experience	44.4%	55.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	18.2%	45.5%	18.2%	9.1%	9.1%

Benefits for Student Mentors

Impact

- On a questionnaire about the impact of the experience, mentors were positive, with the majority reporting the experience helped increase their confidence and improve useful skills.
- See table below for more information about the project's impact on mentors.
- Mentors completed questionnaires at the start and end on self-esteem, self-efficacy and psychological understanding. Increases were seen in their self-efficacy and in two out of nine aspects of psychological understanding.

Perceived benefits from focus group discussions

- Mentors also took part in group discussions at the start and end of the project.
- Several mentors specifically commented that the experience had helped them consider their potential career options - for some it strengthened their desire to work in education, whilst others wanted to consider other options after seeing how challenging working in a school setting could be.
- The experience of making a difference to other people came across as rewarding.
- Developing communication skills for working with young people different from themselves and learning how to adapt information for different people were key benefits.
- Some mentors reported feeling greater confidence in presenting to, or communicating with others. For example, one mentor said: "I think it definitely made me more confident presenting because I noticed the difference when we were doing the lab report presentations [in university classes]".

Summary of mentors' responses to statements about the impact of mentoring sessions

The mentoring sessions...	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Developed my speaking skills	50.0%	25.0%	25.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Developed my presentation skills	62.5%	37.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Developed my confidence	62.5%	37.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Developed my understanding of psychology	0.0%	75.0%	12.5%	12.5%	0.0%
Made me feel more motivated to study	12.5%	50.0%	25.0%	12.5%	0.0%
Enabled me to meet new people	62.5%	25.0%	12.5%	0.0%	0.0%
Made me feel more connected to the university	25.0%	75.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Future Plans

The psychology mentoring project will run again throughout the next academic year with a new group of student mentors. Feedback from school staff, mentees and mentors will be used to develop the mentoring sessions for the next year to include, for example, more content linked directly to the A-level curriculum.

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