Link Up Leigh Park Project: Evaluation of a Mentoring Programme Intervention

Produced by the University of Portsmouth Link Up Leigh Park Research Team

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Acknowledgements

Funding

Introduction

Approximately 770,000 young people aged 16 to 24 in the UK are not in employment, education, or training (NEET; Office for National Statistics, 2023). The term 'NEET' originated in the UK in the 1990s, categorising 16-to-17-year-olds who were not in education, training, or employment (Upton, 2010). Later, in 2010, the European Commission Employment Committee (EMCO) defined the term as describing 15-to-24-year-olds who are "neither employed nor in any education nor training", including those who are unemployed or inactive (Mascherini, 2018).

Extended periods of being NEET are linked to long-term health consequences (Feng, Ralston, Everington, & Dibben, 2018) and an increased likelihood of future unemployment (Crawford, Duckworth, Vignoles, & Wyness, 2011). Some risk factors associated with becoming a NEET include low levels of qualifications (Bynner & Parsons, 2002), uncertain career aspirations (Yates, Harris, Sabates, & Staff, 2010), and poor mental health (Holmes, Murphy, & Mayhew, 2019). Another risk factor for becoming NEET is coming from a low socio-economic background (Sadler, Akister, & Burch, 2015). It is well-known that individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds face different challenges and experience different outcomes (Rolle et al., 2008). Socio-economic status (SES) refers to an individual's situation concerning various social and economic factors (MacKinnon, 2022). Further negative outcomes associated with low SES include reduced cognitive and socioemotional development, lower academic attainment, and physical and mental health issues (Hackman & Farah, 2009).

Leigh Park is one of five 'left behind' areas in England, with higher rates of unemployment and child poverty, and poorer health, compared to other areas in England (MacKinnon, 2022). As such, individuals in Leigh Park may be at higher risk for becoming NEET compared to those in other areas in England. Link Up Leigh Park is a project funded by the Health Foundation UK which aims to improve opportunities, attainment, and health for young people living in Leigh Park (The Health Foundation, 2021). The Link Up Leigh Park project aims to address the specific challenges faced by individuals in Leigh Park through the implementation of new, effective interventions with long-term benefits (The Health Foundation, 2021). The targeted population for the overall project is 16-to-24-year-olds who are living in Leigh Park and NEET.

Many interventions and policies have focussed on the NEET population. Some examples include the Prince's Trust Team Programme, ThinkForward's FutureMe programme, the Fight for Peace Pathways programme, and the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework. Interventions can be preventative or reintegrative. Preventive interventions aim to reduce the likelihood of individuals becoming NEET while reintegrative interventions aim to re-engage current NEETs. Previous research has indicated that high-contact, multi-component interventions (Mawn et al., 2017), and those that include flexible and tailored support (Learning and Work Institute, 2020), are particularly effective.

Previous literature also highlights the role of good education, training, and work experience are vital steps that need to be taken so that a job is secured (Thompson, 2011). However, disadvantaged youth may find it more difficult to access education, training, or gain work experience due to potentially limited resources, and inability to compete in education and labour markets. Moreover, socio-economic status

plays a significant role in young individuals' abilities to pursue education and employment. Strong positive correlations have been found between young people with a low socio-economic background and being uneducated or unemployed (Thompson, 2011). This means that the younger residents of Leigh Park may find it harder to seek and secure education, employment, or training due to their potentially low socio-economic status and the limited resources available to them.

Therefore, interventions such as the Mentoring Programme have been developed by HBC to address these issues and to help support young individuals living in Leigh Park to seek and secure prospects including but not limited to employment, education, and training. The Mentoring Programme was developed with the consideration of the needs of 16-24-year-olds living in Leigh Park which were identified during the 'Insight Phase' of the wider LULP project. The insight phase gained a comprehensive, evidence-based perspective by engaging with various stakeholders including the young individuals from Leigh Park, their families, businesses in the local area and organisations working with young people from Leigh Park. As a result, the Mentoring Programme and this evaluation are a part of the wider LULP programme which aims to gain a better understanding of the barriers that young adults aged between 16-24 years old face around staying in education and employment.

The Mentoring Programme was organised by a Lead Mentor, employed by Havant and South Downs College (HSDC). The initial session within the mentoring programme aimed to get to know each student and learn the different facets of their life and how this impacts the way they live. Following this, a series of questions and active listening explored what was important to the student and areas that they would like to change. Once a particular area was identified and chosen by the student, several adaptable resources based on therapy and goal setting were used to dive deeper into what was important to the student about that specific area. The mentoring resources were mainly based on mental health, emotional well-being, ambivalence, self-confidence, values, goal setting and employability. Once the student was ready to move forward, a plan was formed using bite-size achievable targets. Students were encouraged to focus on achieving goals, and continually evaluating and celebrating progress.

The Mentoring Programme was evaluated so that a better understanding of any impact it may have on the lives of 16- to 24-year-olds living in Leigh Park is explored and understood. Moreover, this evaluation will also help gain a better grasp of potential future steps towards improving the existing programme and/or developing new interventions that may be needed. This evaluation aims to explore the acceptability, usability, and impact of the Mentoring Programme for this age group from the Leigh Park area. Additionally, the evaluation has been designed around the Theoretical Framework of Acceptability (TFA; Sekhon et al. 2017) and therefore, our definition of acceptability used here is based on the definition by Sekhon and colleagues as the extent to which people receiving an intervention consider it to be appropriate, based on their anticipated or experienced cognitive and emotional responses to the intervention (Sekhon et al. 2017). The TFA is a well-established framework that has been used extensively in evaluating the acceptability of interventions. It has been used across different populations (e.g. Pattison et al., 2022; Smith et al. 2022) and settings (e.g. Van Slingerland & Durand-Bush, 2021) including in evaluating mentoring programmes (Criss et al. 2022). As a result, the evaluation will explore any changes and outcomes as a result of the programme and look at further potential solutions for improving this service should that be necessary.

Method

A total of eight young individuals aged between 16- to 18-year-olds already involved in the Mentoring Programme were invited to take part in the interviews. All the individuals were college students at Havant and South Downs College (HSDC) and were approached by the Link Up Leigh Park Coordinator. Of those students, three individuals provided written consent and participated in the interviews. Following this, the Link Up Leigh Park coordinator contacted tutors in HSDC to invite students from the same age group who declined to take part in the Mentoring Program. This was done to gain a balanced view of the mentoring programme and to understand why students may have decided not to take part. From these students, one participant provided written consent and participated in the interview. As participant numbers were low, to preserve the anonymity of participants as much as possible, we have decided not to report the gender of the participants.

Interview Schedule

The interview topic guide used for those who took part in the Mentoring Programme aimed to understand the participants' thoughts and experiences of the programme to explore its impact. A separate topic guide was used for the participants who chose not to take part in the programme. This explored the participant's views of the Mentoring Programme, their decision to not take part in it and perceived potential barriers to taking part in the programme. Interview guides for both programme participants and non-participants were developed to consider 8 areas of interest as denoted in italics below. The areas considered addressed each of the constructs of the Theoretical Framework of Acceptability (TFA), which allowed for assessing the acceptability of the intervention:

- The *ethicality* of the Mentoring Programme; "What do you think is/was the purpose of the programme?" or "In your own words, could you please describe your thoughts on the Mentoring Programme?".
- Views on outcomes of the programme (*intervention coherence*); "What did you first think and believe was required from you in order to take part in the Mentoring Programme?" or "What do you believe is/was/would be the purpose of the programme?".
- Programme effectiveness (*perceived effectiveness*); "What do you think are the effects of the Mentoring Programme on you personally (positive/negative)?" or "What do you think might be the effects of the Mentoring Programme for individuals/people who took part?".
- Expectations of the programme (*affective attitudes*); "How did you feel about the Mentoring Programme after taking part?" or "What would you expect from a Mentoring Programme?".
- Time and effort (*burden*); "Apart from your time, what else did you have to dedicate to the Mentoring Programme?" or "What did you first think and believe would have been asked from you (required) in order to take part in the programme?".
- Compromise in taking part in the programme (*opportunity costs*); "Was there anything you anticipated you may have to give up (or stop doing) in order to participate in the Mentoring

Programme? " or "Was there anything you thought that you may have to give up/stop doing in order to take part in the programme?".

- Derived learning (*self-efficacy*); "What skills do you feel you have developed as a result of participating in the Mentoring Programme?" or "Was there any aspect of the mentoring programme that you were concerned you might not be able to achieve?".
- Career Aims; "Is there anything you would like to learn/have training on so that you can better achieve your goals?".

Procedure

Havant South Downs College (HSDC) played a vital role in the Link Up Leigh Park Project and is a trusted partner for the research element of the project. The Link Up Leigh Park coordinator from HSDC supported the research team with the participant recruitment. The UoP research team sent the participant information sheet to the Link Up Leigh Park Coordinator who passed these to the young individuals who then had at least 48 hours in which to read about the evaluation and to ask any questions they may have had. Any individual who agreed to be interviewed liaised with the LULP Coordinator about their availability, and they then informed the UoP research team and a date was arranged for the interview. On the day of the interview, the young person who agreed to take part in the interview was greeted by the UoP researcher and the LULP coordinator and invited to make themselves comfortable. Once the participant was settled, the LULP Coordinator left the room and the participant was given the consent form to sign before the interview started. The participant was then reminded of the aims of the study, as well as their right to withdraw. After this, the researcher turned on the audio recorder and began the semi-structured interviews, which lasted a maximum of 30 minutes. These interviews were conducted on the premises of HSDC approximately two weeks after the participants completed the Mentoring Programme. The participant who did not take part in the Mentoring Programme was interviewed once the Programme had ended. This was about eight weeks after the interviews with the Mentoring Programme participants had taken place.

Analysis

The data collected were analysed using inductive Thematic Analysis (TA). TA is a flexible, yet systematic qualitative data analysis method and its application ranges from relatively straightforward descriptive overviews of key features in data to more elaborate and complex, conceptual readings of data that examine the theoretical implications of the analysis (Clarke, Braun, & Hayfield, 2015). Moreover, inductive TA aims to be primarily grounded in the data being as close as possible to the meanings in the data (Clarke, Braun, & Hayfield, 2015). There are six steps to TA (Clarke, Braun, & Hayfield, 2015): 1. Familiarisation: facilitated by an in-depth knowledge of, and engagement with the data set by listening to the interviews, reading transcripts, studying notes so that key ideas can be identified; 2. Coding: a systematic process of identifying and labelling relevant features of the data – in relation to the research questions. This is the first step in the process of identifying patterns in the data set. 3. Searching for themes: the process of clustering together codes to generate a plausible mapping of key patterns in the data; 4. Reviewing themes: check whether the candidate (initial) themes exhibit a good fit with the coded data and with the entire data set with each having a clear, distinct meaning or concept; 5. Defining and naming themes: the process of writing theme definitions – brief summary for each theme – and

selecting a theme name which will provide a roadmap for the final write-up; 6. Writing the report: bring together the analytic narrative based on compelling data extracts. Themes provide a structured framework for data analysis; however, conclusions are drawn across themes.

Results

The results from the four transcripts were analysed through the lens of the Theoretical Framework of Acceptability (TFA; Sekhon et al. 2017). As such the themes are presented based on the five of the seven actors that the TFA suggests which indicate acceptability for interventions: *Affective attitude, burden, intervention coherence, opportunity costs, and perceived effectiveness.* The other two themes, ethicality and self-efficacy did not really come out in the data. The themes and subthemes are presented in Table 1:

Table 1.
Description of Major themes and Subthemes produced from interview discussions.

Major Themes	Subthemes
Affective Attitude	➔ Pre-Intervention ➔ Post-Intervention
Burden	➔ Perceived Lack of Burden
Intervention Coherence	➔ Understanding of the programme ➔ Personal Issues and Mental Health ➔ Future Improvements
Opportunity Costs	➔ No costs
Perceived Effectiveness	➔ Education ➔ Confidence ➔ Emotions ➔ Mental Health

<u>Affective Attitude</u>

Within the context of the theoretical framework of acceptability (TFA V2; Sekhon et. al., 2017), affective attitude refers to the emotional responses and subjective experiences of the young people who took part in the mentoring programme. Within this theme, two sub-themes arose - Pre-intervention and post-intervention:

Pre-Intervention
It seems the key theme that came about for all the participants pre-intervention was that no one was sure of what to expect from the intervention or did not really understand what to expect. This also led to them not really having any expectations or even feeling nervous.

Um.. at first I didn't fully understand it because obviously it was a new thing and when we were taught about like this thing I kind of forget at that point because it was like two ish months before we actually started doing it but afterwards I came I was fine with it (MP02)

I didn't really know what to expect because at first I was just like 'why am I doing this?' because I didn't know what to expect cuz I thought it would just be um.. maybe I shouldn't really (inaudible word) (MP01)

At first I think I was a bit nervous for it because I didn't know what to expect (MP03)

Even the young person who chose not to take part in the intervention did not know what to expect of it and assumed that taking part in the intervention would be like secondary school, which made it unappealing for them.

Um, I would expect it to work like it did in, like secondary school, where you'd go in and like, erm, they do stuff like 'how's it gone?', 'how's it going?', 'doing good?', yeah. 'Keeping up with your work?' yeah. If you're not then I don't know like 'try this?'.(MP04)

Post-Intervention

The attitude of the participants towards the mentoring programme following the intervention was very positive and some participants expressed their thanks for taking part. In one case, the participants expressed that if it was not for the Mentoring programme they would no longer be in the College.

I'm thankful that I took it on because it really is good.(MP01)

I feel like it offered me some solutions and what I could do with some of my problems which could help me so I feel like it could be quite helpful. (MP02)

Definitely not where I am right now, I mean if it wasn't for the Mentoring Programme I probably would've been kicked out in the second week of college (MP03)

Burden

Sekhon et. al., (2017) define burden as the challenges users face when engaging with a digital health intervention. This includes scenarios where participation demands excessive time, financial costs, or mental effort, leading to an increased burden on participants. One sub-theme was identified under the burden theme - a perceived lack of burden.

Perceived Lack of Burden

One of the encouraging elements that came from the young people is that they were happy with the amount of involvement that was required of them every week and did not have to give up anything to

take part. One participant even increased the contact time for the programme as they felt it was so useful to them.

> *Yeah, that's fine, um for first few weeks it was only half an hour and we didn't have time to cover everything so we extended it to an hour, so when it was the hour sessions I felt like it was perfect time just to cover over everything, with the things that I was talking to him a lot. (MP01)*

> *No, I didn't actually give up anything really, obviously, now I didn't give up anything during it because everything was fine but this mainly was perfect timing because it somehow broke so I could just talk for the hour. (MP01)*

Intervention Coherence

The theme of intervention coherence refers to the level at which those interacting with the mentoring programme understand its purpose (TFA V2; Sekhon et. al., 2017). In the context of the mentoring programme, this revolves around understanding the mentoring programme structure and clarity. Relating to this, three sub-themes arose in this theme; Understanding of the programme; Personal Issues and Mental Health; and Future improvements of the programme.

Understanding of the programme

When the intervention was introduced, there were some mixed findings about what the young people thought it would be about. Some felt that the mentoring programme was about helping them adjust from going to secondary school to college, while others thought it was just to chat about aspects of their lives such as mental health.

> *Um I think the purpose was just to help with um the youth's mental health not only that just support how they're doing in college because um especially in this area it's quite bad… not because of the teachers, the teachers do teach really well it's just that kids are quiet lacking in mental health a bit (MP01)*

> *Erm probably for helping them make the change through secondary to college and if they can't do that, like if they're struggling doing it by themselves, they might have someone else to help them along the way.(MP04)*

In the future ideally, the mentoring programme would be introduced earlier in the year and the aims of the programme should be made clear from the beginning so that the students have a full understanding of what to expect. For the programme of this evaluation, the concept was introduced as the students were receiving their GCSE results and this may have been too late.

Personal Issues and Mental Health

Participants did appreciate that the purpose of the mentoring programme was to get a better understanding of the issues young people go through and to explore methods ways to reduce those issues, as well as help young people understand more about their and others' mental health. There are some of the elements that the young people also felt it helped them with.

For the college to have a better understanding of like any potential issues, and if they can to either lessen the frequency of said issue or prevent it entirely. (MP02)

Um I think the purpose was just to help with um the youth's mental health not only that just support how they're doing in college because um especially in this area it's quite bad because of.. I don't know why it's bad but yeah. (MP01)

Obviously as they're young I think it's important that young people help.. get help into gaining their confidence and helping them change from a negative mindset to a positive.. and to open up when they're young and not when they're older. (MP03)

Future Improvements

Future programmes could be enhanced by speaking to family members or others who are close to the young people. The participants felt that they needed, or received, support and encouragement to attend and that made a difference as to whether or not they participated in the programme.

No I would like a bit of encouragement to join it rather than just myself because I know if it was just me deciding that I wouldn't altogether. (MP04)

It was more my mum because.. like who agreed with it because I'm not a very decisive person but I know if I was, I would have agreed with her, my mum (MP02)

Opportunity Costs

As defined by Sekhon et. al., (2017), opportunity costs refer to the extent to which values or benefits must be forfeited in exchange for using a particular intervention. When discussing the mentoring interventions this construct alludes to the potential trade-offs of utilising the intervention (e.g. time away from friends). Based on the conducted interviews, only one subtheme was identified for this theme.

No Costs

Participants felt that other than their time they did not have to give up anything. They felt that their engagement with the mentoring programme did not require them to sacrifice anything or use a lot of energy.

Um nothing really just my time, I just.. yeah, that's basically about it cuz I keep (inaudible) so it didn't really take much of my energy really cuz it was worth it.(MP01)

Just my time commitment but I think that's it.(MP03)

Perceived Effectiveness

Within the context of the theoretical framework of acceptability (TFA V2; Sekhon et. al., 2017) perceived effectiveness is defined as an individual's subjective judgement or belief of the mentoring programme in

that it is likely to achieve its intended goals or purposes. It encompasses the personal evaluations and assessments the young people made concerning the intervention's potential to deliver the desired outcomes.

Education

The young people felt that the intervention had a positive effect on their education and adjustment to college. Although the Mentoring Programme had a positive effect in terms of what they wanted to do in the future, not everyone felt that they were clear on their plans and therefore it may be worth considering extending the sessions in the future, in order to explore elements of education or job/career routes that the participants may be interested in pursuing.

> *I mean I've been able to change myself, that's a good thing, I came in like all stressed and all that and I was just like this is college, it's going to be difficult settling in, within a second I settled in fine. I mean it's achieved its purpose. (MP03)*

> *Uh.. No cuz I wouldn't know what I want specifically (MP02)*

Confidence

One young person felt that the programme also helped with their confidence levels when applying for jobs or even just around asking questions.

> *Uh confidence because if you want to be able to get a job you need to have the confidence to speaking to people you work with and being able to open up to them about the job and asking questions etcetera.(MP03)*

Emotions

Another positive effect of the intervention was on the participants' emotions. The Programme helped the young people self-regulate their emotions when they are experiencing frustrating elements such as coursework and assignments. When asked how they plan to use the skills they acquired in the programme, a participant said:

> *I mean if I ever got angry again, I got frustrated at everything like coursework or assignments, just listen to music for a while and then go back to the task I mean(t) to do. But to also take breaks in between not to do everything all in one go but just take.. just take my time in doing it. (MP03)*

Mental Health

Although the mentor is not a trained mental health or wellbeing practitioner, several young people felt that the intervention had a positive effect on their mental health.

> *Um I think like as I said before the positive effects were like improving me mentally – and stuff, there's nothing negative but I think cuz obviously everyone is different, but I think my time here was positive because (of) what the outcome was in the end. (MP01)*

Discussion and Recommendations

Discussion

The analysis of the mentoring programme transcripts through the lens of the Theoretical Framework of Acceptability (TFA; Sekhon et al., 2017) has provided insightful findings across five of the seven dimensions of acceptability: *affective attitude, burden, intervention coherence, opportunity costs, and perceived efficacy*. Each dimension reveals critical aspects of the programme's impact on participants and areas for future improvement. However, due to the low number of participants, it is important to take these messages with caution.

Expectations

The participants' initial uncertainty and nervousness about the mentoring programme highlight a crucial area for improvement in the pre-intervention phase. The lack of clear expectations may have contributed to initial apprehensions. Post-intervention, however, participants expressed gratitude and recognised the programme's positive impact on their college experience, indicating a significant shift in their affective attitude. This transformation underscores the programme's potential to foster positive emotional responses once participants are engaged.

Burden

The perceived lack of burden among participants is a positive outcome, suggesting that the programme's design was manageable and did not impose excessive demands on the young people. The flexibility in session duration, as appreciated by participants, further supports this finding. Maintaining this balance is crucial to ensure ongoing participation and engagement without adding unnecessary strain. A key element that will need to be explored once the programme grows larger is whether this flexibility can be sustained if the numbers increase, and one person remains in delivering it.

Understanding of the Intervention

The mixed understanding of the programme's purpose at the outset suggests a need for clearer communication about the programme's goals and structure. Participants' varied perceptions—from helping with the transition from secondary school to addressing mental health—indicate that a more consistent and comprehensive introduction could enhance intervention coherence. Ensuring that all participants have a uniform understanding of the program's objectives could facilitate smoother integration and maximise the programme's benefits.

Opportunity Costs

The finding that participants did not perceive significant opportunity costs, aside from their time commitment, is encouraging. It indicates that the programme did not require them to forfeit other valued activities or experiences. This low opportunity cost likely contributed to the overall acceptability of the intervention, suggesting that the programme's scheduling and demands were well-aligned with participants' lives.

Perceived Effectiveness of the Intervention

Participants' feedback on the programme's effectiveness in various domains—such as education, confidence, emotions, and mental health—highlights its multifaceted impact. The positive effects on education and adjustment to college, as well as on emotional regulation and mental health, underscore the programme's success in achieving its intended outcomes. However, the need for more support in future career planning suggests a potential area for enhancement.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from the analysis, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the mentoring programme's acceptability and effectiveness:

1. **Improve Pre-Intervention Communication:**

- Develop comprehensive informational sessions or materials to clearly outline the programme's goals, structure, and expected outcomes.
- Engage participants early, ideally before they transition from secondary school to college, to set clear expectations and alleviate initial apprehensions.

2. **Maintain Flexibility in Participation:**

- Continue to offer flexible scheduling and session lengths to accommodate participants' varying needs and availability.
- Regularly assess and adjust the programme's demands to ensure they remain manageable and do not impose undue burden.

3. **Enhance Intervention Coherence:**

- Standardise the introduction process to ensure all participants have a consistent understanding of the programme's purpose.
- Provide ongoing clarification and reinforcement of the programme's goals throughout the intervention to maintain alignment and coherence.

4. **Expand Support for Career Planning:**

- Integrate sessions focused on career exploration and planning to address participants' uncertainties about their future aspirations.
- Collaborate with career advisors or professionals to offer targeted guidance and resources.

5. **Leverage Support Networks:**

- Encourage involvement from parents, guardians, or other influential figures in participants' lives to promote engagement and participation.
- Develop strategies to actively involve these support networks in the programme's recruitment and retention efforts.

6. **Regularly Evaluate and Adapt the Programme:**

- Implement a continuous feedback mechanism to capture participants' experiences and suggestions for improvement.
- Use this feedback to make iterative adjustments to the programme, ensuring it remains responsive to participants' evolving needs and preferences.

By addressing these recommendations, the mentoring programme can enhance its acceptability and perceived effectiveness, ultimately supporting the positive development and well-being of young people as they transition through critical educational stages.

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