



**Brightside Mentoring: Prepare for HE**  
**June – October 2020**

Evaluation Report

*"I have gained more of an insight into how going to University will benefit me, the opportunities it will provide me with, and the experience I will gain from attending. The programme has helped me realise that attending University will be the right decision - this is something I have been weighing up since applying at the end of last year! My mentor has really helped me to look forward to University and I am so glad I took part in this programme."*

**- Mentee (mature student, POLAR Q2, first generation in family to go to university)**

*"I have gained a better understanding about what HE entails and what life as a student is like so I will now be going to university feeling a lot more confident and more prepared to start my course."*

**- Mentee (Y13, POLAR4 Q2, IMD Q1, Free School Meals)**

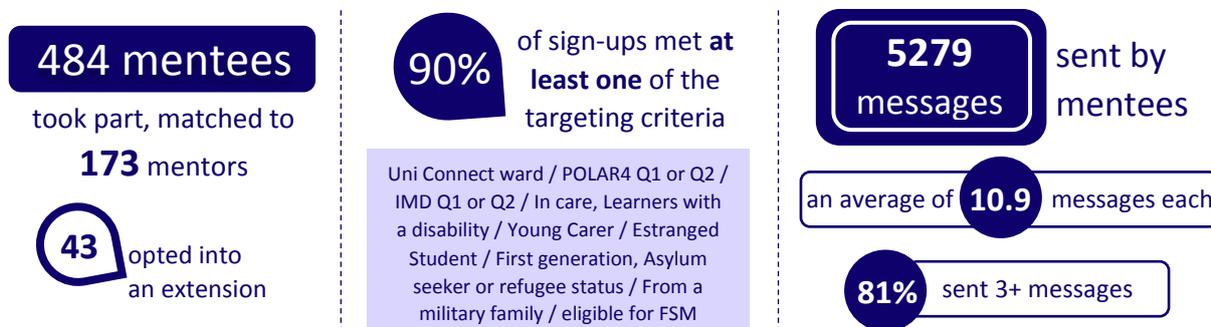
*"Thank you so much for offering this mentoring, it has helped me so much and I'm sure many others especially given how uncertain this year has been for students."*

**- Mentee (Y13, POLAR4 Q1, Uni Connect postcode)**

*"I think the key message which resounds in my head from my mentor was that I earned my place on my forthcoming degree."*

**- Mentee (mature student, first generation in family to go to university)**

## Executive Summary



Almost 500 learners from across the country received mentoring support through an efficient, successful and collaborative programme at a time of significant disruption. Engagement (the amount and frequency of messages sent by mentees) remained high throughout, including when broken down by mentee type or measure of deprivation, indicating that the programme has successfully reached those who traditionally need the most support in negotiating their education journey.

Mentees reported high quality mentoring relationships, with **98% enjoying the programme** and **99% feeling they got on with their mentor**. Mentors agreed, with 93% of respondents agreeing that they were well-matched, and able to build a positive relationship with those who engaged. Qualitative feedback from mentees highlighted relatability and shared or similar experiences as being key factors in building up these positive mentoring relationships.

## Recruitment and conversion



The 44% conversion rate was lower than was expected, but compares reasonably favourably with other projects considering the external environment. Recruiting students to opt in to a project, particularly when post-16, results in higher engagement but we do see attrition rates during onboarding as the intervention is opt-in; a 50%-60% conversion rate for similar projects is normal in Brightside's experience. Recruiting mentees through school and college networks was particularly challenging during the lockdown period, when partner staff had no face-to-face contact with students, and limited communication with teachers juggling many competing priorities.

Recruiting mentees through routes connected to their HE offers worked particularly well, with most sign-ups coming from UCAS and universities directly targeting their offer-holders.

Mentor recruitment was highly successful, with more than enough mentors trained and match-ready within a short timeframe. However, a significant proportion remained unmatched due to lower than anticipated mentee numbers.

## Impact

Knowledge about what to expect from student life and the key differences between learning and teaching styles at HE level

increased by **17pp** overall

increased for **54%** of mentees

**22%**

of mentees were more motivated and excited by their HE subject

**28%**

were more confident that they would have a positive HE experience

### Increases in

**Social capital:** +12pp overall & for 46% of mentees

**Human capital:** +23pp overall & for 27% of mentees

**Hope:** +3pp overall & for 24% of mentees

### Significant movement in

#### Self-efficacy and Coping

Notable % of mentees experiencing both positive and negative change

**97%** progressed on at least one outcome

**86%** progressed on multiple outcomes

**70%**

On average, mentees progressed positively on

**4 outcomes**

said that mentoring contributed to their decision about what to do next

Prepare for HE had a particularly positive impact on mentees' knowledge about what to expect from student life and the differences in learning and teaching styles. It also supported almost half of mentee respondents to develop social capital, which was particularly pronounced for mature students.

The impact data suggests that the external environment and ongoing challenges and uncertainty around student life at HE continued to impact mentees even though they were getting mentoring support. A significant proportion of mentees (48%) could have recorded positive change for hope through the survey but did not, even though 97% of them agreed that mentoring had made them feel more positive about the future and much of the qualitative feedback alluded to this. Mentees also recorded significant movement (both positive and negative) for self-efficacy and coping.

Y13 mentees who were unsure about their next steps when signing up to the programme, although a small proportion of the overall cohort, had the lowest proportion of mentees recording positive change in knowledge around HE, and the highest proportion showing negative change in human capital, coping, self-efficacy and growth mind-set.

## Impact of Covid-19

At the end of the programme,

**90%**

of mentees intended to start an HE course in 2020

### 4 key themes

come through in the qualitative data



Nerves & uncertainty around **results and calculated grades**



Stress & disappointment around **results on the day**



Worry about **online learning** at university



Nerves about **effect of social distancing** on HE experience

This learning should be used to inform the support put in place for students this academic year, particularly Y13 learners (who may need to navigate similar challenges in 2021) and Y12 learners, many of whom will be deciding in favour of or against HE in the coming months

## Recommendations

To recruit and convert a higher number of mentees, programmes should:

- Continue to **engage UCAS and admissions teams** to reach out directly to offer-holders
- Set mentee **recruitment targets based on an expected conversion rate** of 40% - 50% (in current climate)
- Consider an **earlier launch date and therefore an earlier recruitment phase**.
- **Review recruitment and conversion communications and materials** to ensure it is clearer who the mentors are, to manage mentee expectations
- Consider **recruiting mentors from partners' Student Ambassador pools**
- **Streamline the recruitment and onboarding process** so that interested mentees can register, create accounts, choose a mentor and start messaging as quickly as possible

To improve the impact on mentees, programmes should:

- Adapt mentor training, support materials and communications to include more support and signposting for **Y13s who are unsure about their next steps**
- Continue to explore **additional delivery elements to support mentees' general hope for the future**, such as Brightside's Ask the Expert function and project extensions
- Ensure mentoring guides encourage discussions on the **importance of networking and developing networking skills**
- Find ways to **help mentors to identify where mentees' coping or self-efficacy may be fluctuating or low** during a programme, and focus on this development with them

To improve the quality of the mentee/mentor experience, programmes should:

- Continue to **monitor and send reminders** about prompt replies
- Continue using the **matching tool** for mentees to select their own mentor
- Explore **ways in which mentees could access support from other mentors** on the project, and the **addition of some video elements** in line with Brightside's developments in this area
- Add 'expectations' to both mentor and mentee **training sessions, induction materials and/or welcome packs**, so that participants can understand what is expected of them and are encouraged to relate to each other's experiences and challenges
- **Update automatic engagement reminders** to take into account messages that may be pending in moderation
- Consider **how mentor group chats can be better utilised** to enhance the mentoring experience.
- **Discuss any extensions with mentors**

Full recommendations can be found in Section 7 of this report.

## Contents

<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1 Background .....	7
1.2 Aims.....	8
1.3 Structure .....	8
1.4 Evaluation methods .....	9
<b>2. Recruitment, training and conversion.....</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1 Mentees .....	10
2.2 Mentors.....	14
2.3 Learning and recommendations .....	14
<b>3. Engagement .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>4. Impact.....</b>	<b>21</b>
4.1 Project-specific outcomes.....	21
4.2 Capital and behavioural outcomes .....	23
4.3 Decision-making and confidence .....	31
<b>5. Quality of the experience.....</b>	<b>36</b>
5.1 Mentees .....	36
5.2 Mentors.....	38
<b>6. Impact of Covid-19.....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>7. Conclusions and recommendations .....</b>	<b>44</b>

## 1. Introduction

This report evaluates the engagement, quality and impact of Prepare for HE, a programme delivered by Brightside and nine partners in 2020, which supported 484 learners with 173 online mentors. The report sets out the context of the project (its background, aims and structure) before outlining the evaluation methods used to measure its success. The report first focuses on project set-up – recruitment and conversion of mentees onto the programme, and makes some recommendations for future projects. It then analyses the engagement on the programme, the impact of mentoring on the participants, and the quality of their experience. The final section of the report uses qualitative data to highlight common thoughts and feelings around HE relating to the Covid-19 pandemic. Recommendations are included throughout, and summarised at the end with the main conclusions.

### 1.1 Background

Brightside is a charity, creating inspirational mentoring relationships which help young people make confident and informed decisions about their future. We use our 17 years of experience as the UK's leading social enterprise for online mentoring to help organisations identify, reach and inspire young people. We find and train mentors, connect them with young people, and support them as they work together through our online programmes. Our mentoring introduces young people to opportunities from employers and universities so they can develop the knowledge and confidence they need to succeed. We work in every region of England in partnership with universities, business, charities and public sector organisations, and support 10,000 young people each year.

Prepare for HE is a national online mentoring programme, delivered in 2020 by Brightside in partnership with two universities and seven Uni Connect partnerships: University of Chester, University of Surrey, FutureHY, GROWS, Greater Manchester Higher (GM Higher), HeppSY, Higher Education Outreach Network (HEON), Make Happen, and Study Higher. The programme was also supported by UCAS.

Brightside developed this programme in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, which caused a period of major disruption for HE offer holders and particularly Year 13 learners. Exams were cancelled and there was confusion as to what this would mean for university places. The closure of schools and colleges meant that the usual sources of IAG were not in place to support young people in the same way, which was likely to have a disproportionate effect on those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Also, any learners expecting to start their HE courses in September/October 2020 were facing uncertainty about what to expect, from accommodation and socially distant campuses to online teaching. There was concern that:

- a) students would be less likely to take up their university places
- b) there was a risk of a higher drop-out rate of students who were unprepared for university life and who had been disrupted in their pre-arrival phase
- c) student confidence would suffer as a result of the uncertainty
- d) students would not be adequately supported as they dealt with these unexpected developments and uncertainty

In response to this need, Brightside developed Prepare for HE to support offer-holders and other Year 13 students, offering them a mentor to talk to as they navigated this unique and highly complex set of challenges. Brightside put together a project outline and timeline, and Uni Connect partnerships

and universities expressed interest in funding the programme and offering the opportunity to Year 13s and offer-holders in their networks. The nine confirmed partners formed a steering group led by Brightside, and the steering group worked together to agree targeting criteria, recruitment methods, monitoring and reporting requirements, and the evaluation framework.

During the programme design phase, the steering group discussed mentee numbers and agreed to build capacity in the programme to support 1000-1500 mentees in total. This roughly equated to up to 165 mentees per partner which they felt was achievable, and Brightside therefore worked to recruit around 350 mentors.

## 1.2 Aims

Prepare for HE's overall aim was to support students from widening participation backgrounds to transition successfully to Higher Education. To achieve this, the programme aimed to:

- Increase mentees' understanding of what to expect from university study and student life
- Prepare mentees for the change in learning styles in HE
- Help mentees maintain motivation for their chosen subject and institution
- Build a sense of belonging, and help mentees feel confident that they would have a positive HE experience

Brightside's mission is to support young people to make confident and informed decisions about their future and Prepare for HE aligns well with that mission. The programme therefore aimed to help mentees feel more confident about their decision around their next steps, and to address a number of outcomes from Brightside's Theory of Change:

- Human capital: learning specific knowledge and skills
- Social capital: knowing people to turn to for advice and support
- Hope: setting specific goals, and having the flexibility and motivation to achieve them
- Coping: dealing with difficulties in a positive way
- Self-efficacy: having confidence and knowing your strengths
- Growth mindset: believing your abilities can be developed through hard work

Finally, the programme presented an opportunity to learn more about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on learners, which could then help inform the design and implementation of other outreach interventions and transition support. Therefore a secondary aim of Prepare for HE was to understand how the pandemic related to and affected mentees' attitudes, feelings and confidence around HE.

## 1.3 Structure

Prepare for HE launched on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2020. Mentees and mentors communicated via Brightside's safe and secure online mentoring platform and app. After signing up to take part, mentees registered on the platform and were able to choose their own mentor based on their interests and what they were hoping to gain from mentoring. The mentor pool was made up of current HE student volunteers as well as volunteers who had been through the HE system but are now working. Mentoring pairs were matched for the duration of the programme until 21<sup>st</sup> September 2020.

During the programme, Brightside supported participants through regular communications, including recommendations for themes and topics to discuss, and signposting to useful resources – particularly updates on the rapidly developing external landscape around grades, results and university places.

Brightside also sent engagement reminders to mentor and mentees who had not responded within the recommended timeframes, to help encourage ongoing and expansive conversations. For mentors, Brightside provided an extensive mentoring guide which highlighted key milestones in the student journey during the programme, advice on how to cover these topics through mentoring, and tips for encouraging and sustaining mentee engagement. Mentors were also given the opportunity to join mentor group chats on the platform, which created a space for peer support and sharing of good practice.

Discussions with UCAS during the project set-up phase highlighted concern about mentees missing key deadlines regarding milestones such as accepting their offers. We therefore worked with them to offer an additional element of the project in the first half of June using Brightside's 'Ask the Expert' feature, leading up to the 18<sup>th</sup> June acceptance deadline. We uploaded a profile for a member of staff from UCAS, Courteney Sheppard (Senior Customer Experience Manager – Students), and mentors and mentees were encouraged to submit questions anonymously. Courteney's responses were then posted on the Brightside platform for all users to view. The questions submitted included queries about changing choices later down the line, late applications, navigating results day, calculated grades, deferrals, Clearing, online teaching at university, and support for students with disabilities.

It was clear from the ongoing monitoring and support for participants that many mentees were still messaging very frequently up until the scheduled end date of 21<sup>st</sup> September. As most mentees were starting or making final preparations for the start of term, and the Covid-19 pandemic was still causing disruption and uncertainty around what the experience would be like for incoming students, the steering group agreed to offer an optional extension to the end of October. 43 mentees and their mentors took up this opportunity and remained matched.

#### **1.4 Evaluation methods**

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme, we have used a number of methods and types of data:

- Engagement is measured through quantitative data pulled from the online mentoring platform, which shows number of messages sent and received by participants.
- The impact of the project is measured through baseline and exit surveys completed by mentees; survey questions were designed to address the aims and outcomes listed above, including the project-specific outcomes and Brightside's Theory of Change outcomes.
- Surveys included response scales as well as open-text responses.
- Open-text responses have been used throughout the evaluation to understand how and why certain outcomes were achieved for mentees.
- The content of conversations (the messages mentees and mentors sent) is another source of qualitative data used to understand the thoughts and feelings of mentees in relation to the programme aims.
- The quality of the mentoring experience for both mentors and mentees is also measured through questions on the exit surveys, including qualitative responses.

Of the 484 mentees who chose a mentor and were matched over the course of the programme, 204 completed the exit survey (a response rate of 42%). It should be noted that the majority of responses are likely to be from engaged mentees who remained active until the end. Therefore, the data relating to the quality and impact of the programme gives a reliable overview of the experience had by

mentees who took part and engaged with their mentor. In future projects, a mid-point survey could provide additional data and a helpful insight into the experience of less-engaged mentees.

Of 173 matched mentors, 28 completed the exit survey, a 16% response rate. The mentee survey is made compulsory on the platform (meaning mentees must answer it before they can access their messaging channel). This is not the case for the mentor survey, which explains the lower response rate. Future projects could look to distribute the mentor survey slightly earlier, and Brightside should also explore the possibility of similar compulsory survey functionality for mentors as is currently in place for mentees.

As well as looking at engagement, quality and impact for those who took part, this evaluation also considers key elements of project delivery, specifically the recruitment, training and conversion of mentors and mentees onto the project. The report therefore includes qualitative feedback from the steering group and partner delivery staff (who led mentee recruitment), and from four 'unconverted' mentees who responded to a request for feedback regarding why they had not chosen a mentor and started the programme.

Finally, in the future we will be able to use hard data from HEAT (Higher Education Access Tracker) to see what proportion of mentees went on to successfully enrol in HE. We should receive the first set of this tracking data in spring/summer 2021, at which point we will add detail into this evaluation report. Until then, we can use the data in this report to tell us about mentees' intentions around HE as they were explicitly asked about this in their exit survey in September 2020.

## **2. Recruitment, training and conversion**

### **2.1 Mentees**

Initially, mentee recruitment was led by the nine university and Uni Connect partners. Brightside developed materials aimed at mentees, including social media assets, flyers and suggested copy for email and text communications for schools, colleges and learners. All materials linked to an online sign-up form, which interested learners completed. After completing the sign-up form, learners then received a welcome pack directly from Brightside, which contained a video and more information about the programme and how to make the most of it. The programme launched on 1<sup>st</sup> June, when all sign-ups received instructions on creating their Brightside account and choosing their mentor. Mentees could then immediately start communicating with their match. For any mentees signing up from 1<sup>st</sup> June onwards, these instructions were included with the welcome pack so that they could get started immediately.

#### **Mentee recruitment methods**

Partners recruited mentees in a range of ways, including:

- Reaching out directly to learners with offers for their institutions (or partner HEIs within the Uni Connect partnerships)
- Sending information to schools and colleges within their networks and regions, to ask them to promote the opportunity to Y13 students
- Sending information directly to Y13 students who had previously taken part in an outreach activity

Most partners built strategies around recruiting learners meeting widening participation criteria such as postcodes in POLAR4 Q1 or 2, Uni Connect target wards, young carers, Looked After Children, young people from military families and young people eligible for Free School Meals. Partners who were recruiting through schools, colleges and other networks prioritised those with high proportions of students meeting this criteria. Through Brightside’s mentor recruitment, there was capacity for 1000-1500 mentees and therefore the steering group agreed that Brightside could accept eligible learners signing up immediately onto the programme. Brightside monitored and dealt with sign-ups on a daily basis and sent weekly recruitment updates to partners so that we could ensure the process was fair across the partnership and numbers were within capacity for the project.

### UCAS support

Partners began recruiting mentees from 15<sup>th</sup> May and efforts continued throughout June after the project launch as there was plenty of capacity among the mentor pool. The UCAS acceptance deadline came part-way through June and enabled partners to reach out to learners to offer support in the lead-up, as well as afterwards once they had confirmed their offers and moved into the pre-arrival phase.

569 learners had signed up by 2<sup>nd</sup> July, and 46% of these (260 learners) had chosen a mentor and therefore ‘converted’. With places still left on the programme, Brightside liaised with UCAS who had agreed to support recruitment efforts through their channels with offer-holders. The steering group agreed to ask UCAS to target students within their system, holding offers, from POLAR4 Q1 or Q2 postcodes. Partners provided a list of regions to enable UCAS to target learners within their remit as outreach or widening participation teams, or their Uni Connect wards. UCAS contacted these offer-holders with information about the opportunity and a link to the sign-up form. Upon signing up, Brightside were able to check their postcode and allocate them to a partner.

This was a very effective recruitment method, with 466 mentees signing up as a result of the UCAS communication.

**Overall, of the total 1089 who signed up, 484 (44%) converted onto the full programme by choosing a mentor and beginning communications.**

### Numbers and conversion

The table below shows the conversion rate overall, and is broken down by mentee ‘type’ which was established through self-declaration during sign up:

Mentee type	Number signed up	Number of matched mentees	Conversion rate
<b>All mentees</b>	<b>1089</b>	<b>484</b>	<b>44%</b>
Y13 & undecided about next steps	66	26	39%
Y13 & expecting to start HE in 2020	598	273	46%
Mature & starting HE 2020	320	144	45%

Other <sup>1</sup>	105	41	39%
--------------------	-----	----	-----

Understandably, the majority of mentees both recruited and converted were expecting to start their HE course in 2020. This is not surprising due to the remit, aims and recruitment methods for the programme. It is also encouraging to see that some mentees who were less sure about their next step saw the potential benefits of mentoring, and widening the scope of future programmes to actively encourage these learners to take part is something that should be considered.

On their sign-up form, mentees were asked how they heard about the programme. The table below shows how they responded, and the conversion rates for each category:

Recruitment method	Number signed up	Number of matched mentees	Conversion rate
From a member of staff at school or college	197	97	49%
From a university where I have an offer	392	192	49%
UCAS	466	176	38%
Other	34	19	56%

This data suggests that linking the opportunity to learners' offers works particularly well for recruitment, with the highest proportions of sign-ups coming from those who heard from UCAS or from the university they hoped to attend. The lower proportion coming from schools and colleges can certainly be linked to the challenges of the pandemic, with schools and colleges closed during the recruitment window and the channels to learners and teachers being severely disrupted. This was especially true for the Uni Connect partnerships. When it comes to conversion, the table above shows some variation, but generally suggests that employing a range of recruitment methods and enabling partners to try methods that work for them is a sensible approach.

We can also break down mentee recruitment and conversion numbers by various targeting criteria.<sup>2</sup>

Target group	Number signed up	Number of matched mentees	Conversion rate
Uni Connect ward	352	156	44%
POLAR4 Q1 or Q2	776	341	44%
IMD Q1 or Q2	610	274	54%
In care	7	1	14%
Learners with a disability	183	100	55%
Young Carer	31	16	52%

<sup>1</sup> Mentees were asked to select which of the above categories best described them. 105 mentees selected 'Other', with the most common situation being those expecting to take a gap year. There were also a small number of Y12 students, who, after discussion with the steering group, were accepted onto the programme as there was enough space.

<sup>2</sup> Some mentees met multiple criteria, which is why the column totals are different to the totals listed earlier

Estranged Student	35	20	57%
First generation	489	228	47%
Asylum seeker/refugee status	15	9	60%
From a military family	18	11	61%
FSM	103	57	55%

Encouragingly, 90% of learners who signed up met **at least one of** the targeting criteria listed above. This shows that the programme was targeted appropriately.

### Observations on the overall conversion rate

Brightside works with partners to deliver over 60 online mentoring projects each year. Typical, large-scale programmes recruiting post-16 learners from a wide range of places tend to see a conversion rate of 50% - 60%. Our experience has shown us that supporting post-16 students to 'opt-in' to a programme results in higher overall engagement with a mentor but it does mean that there is an attrition rate during onboarding. Considering the external environment, particularly the challenges around engaging learners through schools and colleges when they are closed (highlighted in the quotes from partner staff below), we should see a 44% conversion rate as good.

- *“Due to inability to go into colleges, recruiting was very difficult.”*
- *“Covid, pupils not being on campus, teachers stress due to covid/WFH.”*
- *“General challenges as expected whilst working under lockdown - teachers less responsive to emails/call whilst working from home and prioritising other work over careers/IAG.”*

This being said, the lower-than-expected number of matched mentees – and the subsequent leftover capacity of the mentor pool – is one of the main areas for improvement in future programmes. Section 2.3 of this reports offers some recommendations.

### Results day

The main mentee recruitment window closed in mid-July. Due to the remaining capacity among the mentor pool, the steering group agreed to undertake a second wave of recruitment just before and just after results day in mid-August. There was consensus that receiving results and the impact of university places would create even more challenge and uncertainty for some learners, therefore they may be more inclined to sign up for mentoring support than they were before. However, we did not receive any additional mentee sign-ups at this time. Feedback from partners provides the following reasoning for a lack of additional mentees at this stage:

- The capacity of partner staff to promote the programme was more limited than the first recruitment window, with many brought in to support admissions teams and Clearing within their institutions.
- This period was very confusing, with rapid developments and a huge amount of information for young people to work through. Additional messages about mentoring were likely to be caught up in this and may have stood out less, or learners may not have had the time or headspace to consider them.
- Many learners had immediate and urgent concerns, with pressure to make decisions very quickly. They may not have seen mentoring as providing the quick solutions they needed and

felt it was better to spend time liaising with teachers and university staff who could help them make immediate decisions from a place of expertise and knowledge regarding the specific situation they were going through and the associated timelines and processes.

## 2.2 Mentors

Brightside recruited 348 volunteers for Prepare for HE from both our own volunteer database of DBS-checked volunteers, and through our partnership with STEM Learning who promoted the volunteering opportunity to their STEM Ambassadors.

After seeking feedback from the Brightside Youth Board (a panel of alumni mentees and mentors), we opted to recruit a roughly even split of current HE students and volunteers who had been through the HE system but are now working. This was due to the Youth Board feedback that that general support at a challenging time was what was required most. The inclusion of industry mentors also meant that there was a wider variety of background, experience and expertise for mentees to draw on. Through the matching tool on the platform, mentees were able to choose their own mentor based on their interests, needs and questions.

Brightside trained 274 volunteers (79% of those who had expressed interest) and welcomed them to the online mentoring platform to create profiles ready for matching. The programme aimed to reach between 1000-1500 mentees, and so each mentor expected up to four matches. Due to lower mentee numbers than anticipated, 173 mentors were chosen and matched on the programme and 101 mentors remained unmatched.

Unmatched mentors were asked to remain available on the platform to allow for a rolling mentee recruitment, as well as further recruitment around results day. These mentors remained unmatched but were subsequently offered priority on two further Brightside programmes to provide them with an opportunity to mentor. While this was a challenging situation to manage with the volunteers, Brightside kept them updated and were able to underline the unprecedented and challenging situation for young people, meaning mentee recruitment was more difficult than for 'standard' projects. Overall, mentors were very understanding.

## 2.3 Learning and recommendations

Although we and partners were disappointed that we had many spaces that remained unfilled, we were able to provide mentoring support for almost 500 learners. This was a large, national programme that shows how online mentoring can be used to support learners all over the country. The conversion rate could certainly be improved, but the challenging recruitment circumstances should be noted, particularly trying to access learners via schools and colleges that were closed. The targeting was one of the key successes of the recruitment phase, with 90% of sign-ups meeting at least one of the criteria used and mentees from all but one of the target groups meeting or exceeding the overall programme conversion rate. Another key success was the partnership with UCAS, which brought in 43% of sign-ups. Mentor recruitment was also highly successful; Brightside mobilised and trained enough volunteers, with limited time and tight deadlines, to support over 1000 mentees.

The data suggests that future programmes should:

- Continue to engage UCAS in recruitment efforts for programmes aimed at supporting offer-holders

- Continue to engage admissions teams within universities to reach out directly to those holding offers
- Continue to seek out learners meeting particular targeting criteria, as they see this as an appropriate and interesting opportunity as much or more than their non-target counterparts
- Consider actively recruiting Y13 learners who have not applied for HE but who are unsure about their next steps – and adapting any messaging and materials accordingly
- Set mentee recruitment targets based on an expected conversion rate of 40% - 50%

We can also use feedback from partners and unconverted mentees<sup>3</sup> to make additional recommendations:

- Some partners suggested that in the future, with more planning and lead-in time, we could work to an earlier launch date. Looking to engage prospective mentees slightly earlier in the year could mean that schools and colleges have more time to promote the opportunity, and students would also hear about the mentoring before pressure on their time ramps up from things like exams and acceptance deadlines. This is echoed in sentiments from two unconverted mentees, who commented: *“I forgot about it”* and *“Life is busy, so I keep forgetting to log in the account.”* It also came through in partner feedback with comments from delivery staff: *“by the time of promotion many pupils had left FE”* and *“It felt like the recruitment drive came a bit too late to push out to schools properly.”*
- An earlier wave of recruitment would also mean that there would be more time to support the Y13s who were less sure about their next steps, ensuring there was time for them to explore options like late applications and UCAS Extra.
- There was a small amount of anecdotal feedback – from partners who had spoken to mentees and from mentees who were struggling to choose a mentor – that some sign-ups were expecting to match with a student from their specific university. This is perhaps unsurprising, considering many heard about mentoring from that university, but it would certainly be worth reviewing the recruitment materials to ensure expectations are managed appropriately. This need is echoed by a comment from a partner staff member regarding what improvements could be made: *“clearer message about who the mentors are to manage expectations etc.”*
- Although the excellent engagement levels (discussed in the next section of this report) indicate that a mentor from their chosen HEI is not essential for the programme to succeed, future programmes could consider recruiting some student mentors from partner HEIs (through Student Ambassador networks, for example). This would help diversify the mentor pool even further, and may help a higher number of sign-ups convert, as suggested by one unconverted mentee who indicated that they couldn’t find a mentor that suited them, and suggested that *“More mentors to choose from”* would improve the project. Feedback from partners suggested that if this option is considered in future, the mentors should be paid by the partner HEI, which may require additional engagement reporting from Brightside. We would also need to carefully consider expectations, as there may be challenges with some partner HEIs wanting their mentors to only be matched with their own offer-holders.
- Finally, some partner staff suggested looking to streamline the recruitment and onboarding process: *“Students go AWOL between sign up and automated communication from Brightside”*

---

<sup>3</sup> Four students completed a survey sent by Brightside to all sign-ups who did not convert to matched

to match themselves. Too many steps involved so a one stop sign-up and matching would be best... Any 'hand-holding' for students needs to be put in place straightaway to act whilst students are still interested." The main reason for a separate sign-up form was to ensure we knew which partner had recruited them, and mentees recruited before 1<sup>st</sup> June launch date did have to wait for matching to be ready due to ongoing mentor recruitment and training. This may well have contributed to the drop-off between sign-up and match, so alternative solutions enabling an even swifter match should be explored for future programmes.

### 3. Engagement

The table below shows the overall engagement for the 484 mentees that were matched on the programme:

Total messages sent	Average messages sent	Proportion of mentees above 1 message sent	Proportion of mentees above 3 messages sent	Proportion of mentees above 6 messages sent	Proportion of mentees above 12 messages sent
5279	10.9	94%	81%	61%	34%

Although this data does not speak to the content of mentoring conversations, these numbers are very positive and high in Brightside's experience. Over 80% met the 3+ messaging benchmark – Brightside's base level metric for an engaged interaction – and the average number of messages sent by mentees shows that many of them went on to engage to a very high level.

#### Breakdown by mentee 'type'

Y13 learners had higher levels of engagement than mature learners, with mentees who were leaving school/college and expecting to start an HE course having the highest engagement:

	Matched mentees	Average messages sent	Proportion of mentees above 1 message sent	Proportion of mentees above 3 messages sent	Proportion of mentees above 6 messages sent	Proportion of mentees above 12 messages sent
Final year of school/college & undecided about next steps	27	13.1	89%	74%	59%	41%
Final year of school/college & expecting to start HE	271	13.2	96%	86%	69%	43%
Mature student & expecting to start HE	146	7.2	92%	48%	21%	0%
Other	31	7.6	97%	77%	55%	19%

Y12	9	7.7	100%	100%	56%	22%
-----	---	-----	------	------	-----	-----

In this data, mature students stand out as the least engaged group. From conversations and replies to engagement reminders, we know that some mature learners had more family and work commitments which could explain why a lower proportion reached the 3+, 6+ benchmarks. Some examples taken from mentoring conversations for mature students can be seen below:

- *“to be honest I dont really have me time apart from when my daughter in bed or I have an evening to myself at a weekend.”*
- *“sorry, life got very busy, I'm currently a care assistant and a single parent and have applied for another bank care assistant role and a healthcare assistant bank role at the local hospital so it's been a little crazy with sending forms, ID, zoom interviews etc, I do find it difficult to juggle so much at once sometimes!”*
- *“We sound very alike which is why I chose you as my mentor. I too work hard and whilst my business is only just opening up I have been working at my local Tesco store throughout this pandemic working very long hours.”*
- *“Sorry again for delay. It has been a challenging few weeks - work and family life!”*
- *“Sorry, I’m currently still working as a police officer and work shifts so can’t always get back to you ASAP. but will try to as and when I can.”*
- *“Hi mate really sorry about the slow response been stupidly busy with work, currently inn an estate agent and there work hasn't really slowed down.”*
- *“Sorry for my delayed response I am in the Army Reserves and currently supporting the Covid-19 efforts so long hours and one day off every 6 days.”*

Conversation data also shows that many mature students sent long, considered messages with a number of clear questions, suggesting that although they messaged less the quality was still very high.

We should also note that the engagement rates for Y13 who were undecided about next steps was very good. As mentioned earlier, there is potential for a programme like Prepare for HE to support much higher number of mentees in this category, which is a key group for HEI outreach teams and Uni Connect partnerships. We could therefore look into building some case studies from the mentees who took part this year, to focus on what they gained from mentoring. These could then be used in future to recruit and engage more mentees from this group.

### Breakdown by postcode criteria

The table below shows the engagement data broken down by POLAR4 quintiles, IMD quintiles, and Uni Connect ward:

	Number mentees matched	Average messages sent	Proportion of mentees above 1 message sent	Proportion of mentees above 3 messages sent	Proportion of mentees above 6 messages sent	Proportion of mentees above 12 messages sent
Uni Connect Postcode	156	10.4	93%	76%	62%	34%
POLAR Q1	187	9.9	94%	79%	59%	33%

<b>POLAR Q2</b>	155	10.4	94%	82%	62%	30%
<b>POLAR Q3</b>	42	11.5	95%	83%	67%	45%
<b>POLAR Q4</b>	42	14.3	95%	86%	62%	40%
<b>POLAR Q5</b>	55	12.9	98%	78%	56%	36%
<b>IMD Q1</b>	163	10.7	96%	82%	63%	34%
<b>IMD Q2</b>	111	9.0	95%	80%	57%	29%
<b>IMD Q3</b>	75	11.1	89%	75%	59%	37%
<b>IMD Q4</b>	61	13.3	97%	89%	59%	33%
<b>IMD Q5</b>	54	11.7	91%	78%	61%	35%

From this data, we can note the following:

- Mentees from Uni Connect postcodes engaged in line with the project totals.
- The average number of messages sent within the POLAR4 and IMD breakdowns are slightly higher for mentees from high participation and lower deprivation areas, which is unsurprising as learners from more advantaged backgrounds would be expected to have greater social capital, and experience and confidence in talking to a mentor.
- We should note that the engagement figures for POLAR4 Q1&Q2 and IMD Q1&2 are still excellent and in line with the project totals.

Importantly, POLAR4 Q1&2 learners make up 71% of the total cohort and IMD Q1&2 make up 57%, suggesting the programme has been targeted appropriately, reaching those who traditionally need the most support in negotiating their education journey. The engagement figures show this intervention is appropriate for these students

### Breakdown by other criteria

The table shows how the mentees meeting other targeting criteria engaged compared to the project total. Mentees indicated this through self-declaration on the sign-up form. They could choose more than one option and therefore be included in multiple criteria.

Green indicates that their engagement was the same or greater than the overall project engagement (included in the first row of the table) and orange indicates that it was lower. Again, it should be noted that the overall project numbers are very high; even at the lower end, these engagement rates are good in Brightside's experience.

Number mentees matched	Average messages sent	Proportion of mentees above 1 message sent	Proportion of mentees above 3 messages sent	Proportion of mentees above 6 messages sent	Proportion of mentees above 12 messages sent

<b>Project total</b>	484	10.9	94%	81%	61%	34%
<b>In care</b>	1	6.0	100%	100%	100%	0%
<b>Learners with a disability</b>	100	10.3	91%	73%	50%	29%
<b>Young carer</b>	16	8.1	81%	75%	56%	31%
<b>Estranged student</b>	20	5.7	100%	65%	25%	10%
<b>First generation</b>	226	12.0	95%	82%	62%	38%
<b>Asylum seeker/ refugee status</b>	9	4.9	100%	67%	33%	11%
<b>Military family</b>	11	9.6	91%	82%	64%	27%
<b>Free school meals</b>	57	11.0	96%	88%	72%	37%

Mentees identifying themselves as first generation in their family to attend university and/or eligible for FSM exceeded the overall project engagement rates for all engagement metrics. Those from military families also engaged well, once past the initial message.

Learners with a disability were among those groups with a lower proportion meeting the 1+, 3+ and 6+ benchmarks. However, it is encouraging to see for those who did message regularly engaged well, with an average number of messages sent in line with the project average.

Young carers were the group with the lowest level of engagement when looking at these metrics, but their engagement was still good.

### Extension

It is worth briefly looking at mentee engagement during the extension period, so the table below covers the period 21<sup>st</sup> September – 31<sup>st</sup> October, for the 43 mentees who took up the extension:

<b>Total messages sent</b>	<b>Average messages sent</b>	<b>Proportion of mentees above 1 message sent</b>	<b>Proportion of mentees above 3 messages sent</b>	<b>Proportion of mentees above 6 messages sent</b>
185	4.3	86%	60%	30%

The extension was clearly useful for a number of mentees so future programmes should continue to offer this as students start courses and look ahead to the rest of the first term.

### Overall engagement



**brightside**

ONLINE MENTORING

Throughout the programme, engagement (the number of messages sent by mentees to their mentors and the proportion messaging regularly) was excellent. Even the target groups that had lower proportions of mentees taking part and are traditionally hard to reach engaged well, indicating that this project has successfully met a need and been appropriate for a range of learners including those from less advantaged backgrounds and/or facing additional challenges.

## 4. Impact

### 4.1 Project-specific outcomes

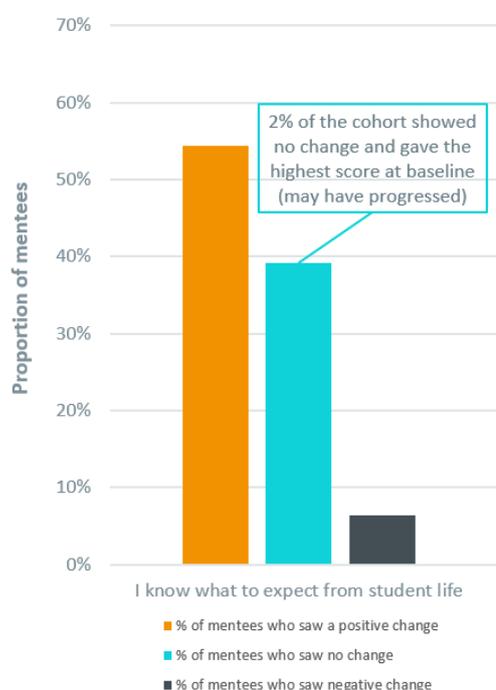
As outlined in the introduction, baseline and exit surveys for mentees included questions around their understanding of what to expect from university study and student life, their readiness for the change in teaching and learning, their motivation for their chosen subject and their level of confidence about a positive HE experience.

#### 4.1.1 At the overall level, mentees' knowledge of what to expect from student life increased by 17 percentage points (pp) between the start and end of the project.

At the individual level, 54% of mentees recorded a positive change for this outcome (see graph below).

This is clearly a strength of the programme, and this can also be seen in many qualitative responses from mentees on the exit survey, for example:

- “Brightside has helped immensely, as nobody in my immediate family progressed to HE. I have been given lots of tips for settling into both the academic and social side of University from my mentor and feel more at ease with the unknown!”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, POLAR4 Q5, Young Carer, First generation)
- “Made me feel at ease into starting university as I now know literally every thing... from unit course selection/attendance to joining a society! Even what bus pass to get!”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, Uni Connect postcode, First generation, Free School Meals)
- “I've gained knowledge and experience from someone who has dealt first hand trying to work with student life, social and work as this was the main thing I was worried about.”*  
(Mature student, Learners with a disability)

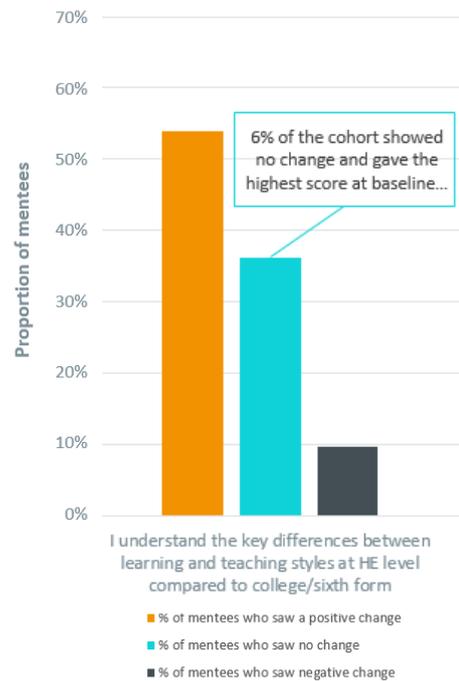


#### 4.1.2 At the overall level, mentees' knowledge of the key differences between learning and teaching styles at HE level compared to college/sixth form also increased by 17 pp.

This outcome also saw 54% of mentees recording a positive change (see below graph).

In their comments, mentees referred to mentoring helping them feel more comfortable or confident about the differences, and some highlighted particular skills they had worked on with their mentors:

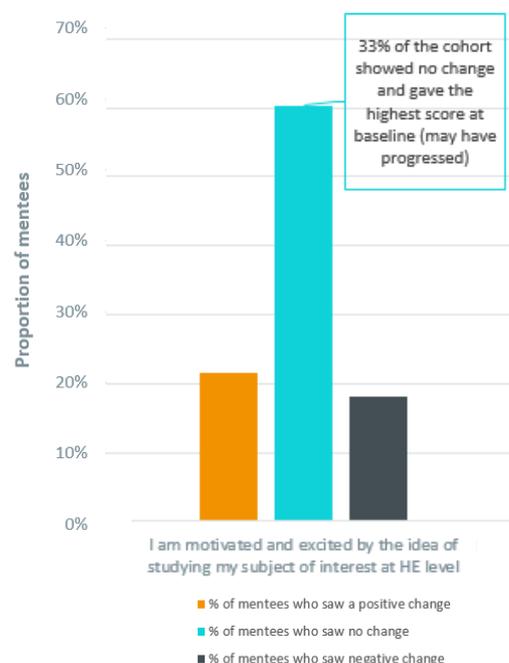
- *“Gave me greater insight to the step up from academics at sixth form and jumping up to university which put me more at ease.”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, IMD Q1)
- *“Transitioning from sixth form to uni and how teaching style and studying changes. Worked a lot on procrastination and working more effectively.”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, First generation)
- *“I have gained advice on what to expect at university as well as organisational skills and the importance of structuring my time and using a planner.”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, Learners with a disability, Young Carer, Free School Meals)



#### 4.1.3 At the overall level, mentees’ motivation and excitement at the idea of studying their subject of interest at HE level increased by 1 pp.

The much lower level of overall change looks to be linked to the high proportion of mentees who were already feeling highly motivated and excited, and gave the maximum response at the start (see graph below). 33% of the cohort gave this response at the start and the end, so they may have experienced a positive change in motivation that was not captured by the survey. The qualitative responses below speak to that theme of motivation and/or excitement:

- *“I have used my mentor to inform me of what a career is going to be like after university and how to stay motivated when going through difficult times.”*  
(Uni Connect postcode, POLAR4 Q1, First generation, Free School Meals)
- *“My subject of interest has inspired me for several years now, and I thoroughly enjoy learning more about the world around me through this perspective.”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, First generation)
- *“Even though I’ve been doing this subject for A level it might be a bit more different, advanced*



*and harder.”*

(Y13 expecting to start HE, POLAR4 Q2, First generation, Free School Meals)

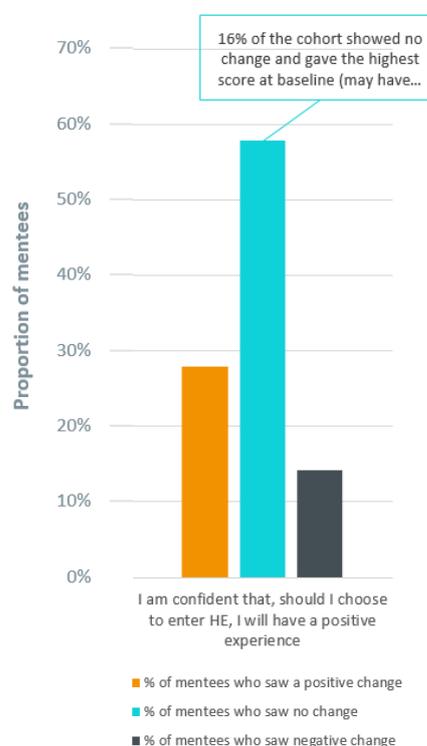
The third quote above possibly alludes to why 10% of mentees may have decreased in this area.

#### 4.1.4 Finally, at the overall level, mentees’ confidence that they would have a positive HE experience increased by 4pp.

Similarly to the previous outcome, a significant proportion of mentees (16%) gave the maximum score at the start and the end (see below graph), meaning the proportion of individual mentees feeling more confident about their HE experience may be higher than the data shows.

Regardless, it is positive to see that 28% recorded an increase in confidence, also demonstrated by the qualitative responses:

- *“They made me realise that the uni experience is nothing to be afraid of.”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, POLAR4 Q2)
- *“A great experience for anyone who is feeling anxious or unsure about going to university. I found it makes you feel confident and reinsured from people who have already gone through the university experience.”*  
(Mature student expecting to start HE, POLAR4 Q2, Learners with a disability)
- *“An experience and opportunity I was so glad I took up, it has made me feel optimistic and excited for the future.”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, Learners with a disability, First generation)



### Comparison between learner types

The results for these outcomes were broadly similar when broken down by the different mentee types, with one notable exception: the overall change for knowledge around what to expect from student life was slightly lower for Y13s who were undecided about what to do next, due to 27% of these mentee respondents recording a negative change for this outcome (significantly more than the other mentees). This could be due to the fact that their conversations focused less on HE and more on a wider range of post-18 options.

## 4.2 Capital and behavioural outcomes

This section of the report looks at how far the capital and behavioural outcomes were addressed for mentees who completed both baseline and exit surveys.

### 4.2.1 Social capital

Mentees were asked how far they agreed that they had people to call on for education or employment advice. Brightside aims to provide this by giving mentees access to a mentor outside their usual network who can provide information as well as signposting them to other sources of information and support.

**When responses were scored and standardised, the overall change at the group level was an increase of 12 percentage points (pp).**

The graph below shows the proportion of mentees who experienced a change in social capital:



46% of mentees experienced an increase in social capital, which is very encouraging considering that the project aims to make mentees more aware of support services and networks available to them.

Interestingly, when we look at the results by mentee type, we can see that 53% of mature learners reported a positive increase which was slightly higher than the other learner types who ranged between 43-46%. Mature learners also saw a notably lower proportion recording negative change for social capital (6% compared to 18-20% for the other mentee types). This may be due to the fact that mature learners are often returning to education after some time away, therefore are less close to the support provided by educational institutions and have fewer peers to draw on support from. It is great to see that Prepare for HE has particularly helped mature student mentees with social capital.

The qualitative feedback collected from the mentee exit survey supports the finding that gaining social capital is a strength of this project for some mentees. Two mentees mentioned how their networking skills were developed through the project and how they felt more confident approaching people after mentoring.

- *“Confident about Uni life, not be scared to approach people.”*  
(Mature expecting to start HE, Military family)
- *“Became more confident with higher education and talking to new people and asking for help.”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, POLAR4 Q1)

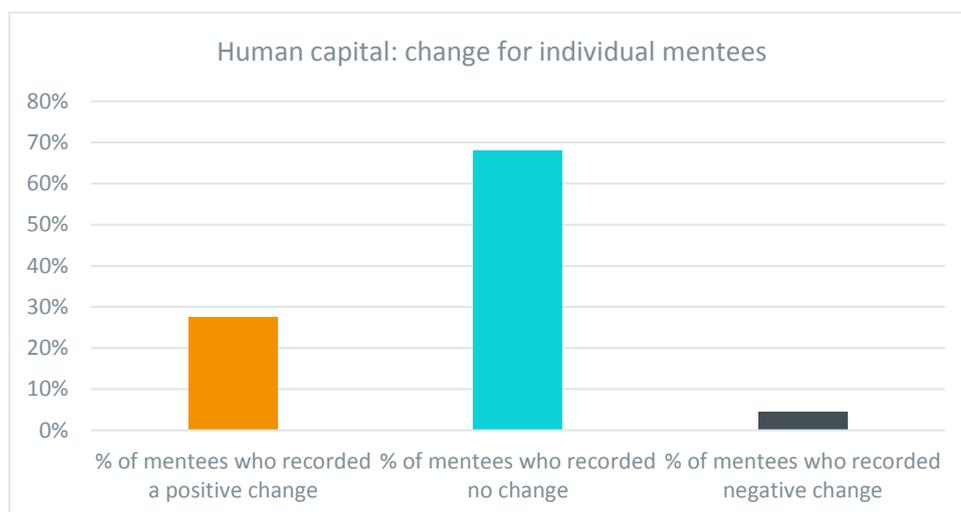
To maintain this and improve social capital for even more mentees (as a significant proportion could have progressed but recorded no change), mentee and mentor mentoring guides could encourage more discussions on the importance of networking and developing networking skills.

#### 4.2.2 Human capital

Prepare for HE aimed to increase mentees' human capital by providing access to relevant people with experience, and online resources where they could explore topics in detail. Mentees were asked how far they agree that they know how to get the qualifications or training they need to get the job they want.

**The overall change at group level was significant, showing an increase of 23 percentage points.**

The graph below shows the proportion of mentees who recorded a positive change in this outcome:



A very small minority of mentees recorded negative change in human capital, which is why the overall group change is so high. When we investigate further we can see that 39% of respondents gave the maximum response to this question at the start and the end, meaning that they may have gained human capital but this is not recorded. So, although 27% recorded an increase, the proportion is likely to be higher.

The qualitative feedback collected from the exit survey supports the finding that gaining human capital is a strength of this project, with many mentees feeling more informed about their career interests and university courses:

- *“Insight to pharmaceutical industry.”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, IMD Q2)
- *“Knowledge of the course I wish to study, how to prepare myself for uni.”*  
(Y12, POLAR4 Q2)
- *“A better understanding of animation.”*  
(Y13 and undecided about next steps, POLAR4 Q1)

- *“I have gained so much insight into how my next few years are going to look, how to prepare for everything University will throw at me, and what to do to pursue my aspirations of becoming an IT consultant.”*

(Y13 expecting to start HE, Uni Connect postcode, POLAR4 Q1)

When we look at mentee type, we find that 52% of mature students gave the maximum response to this question at the start and at the end, a much higher proportion than the other mentee types. This is not surprising, as mature learners are further on in their education and career journey, and many are likely to be returning to education as a result of career plans.

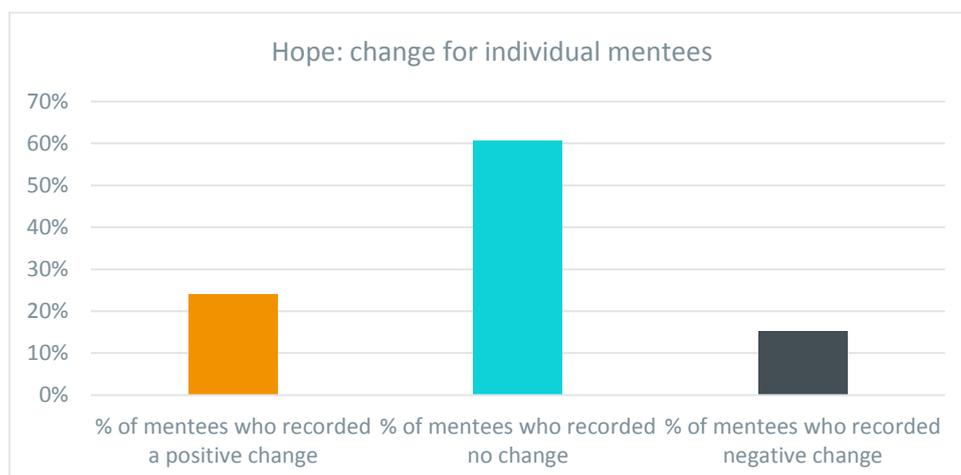
Y13 mentees undecided about their next steps recorded the highest negative change in this outcome – 27% of respondents. It could be that these mentees had explored HE less before starting the programme than the mature learners and their more certain Y13 peers, so they may have ranked themselves high at the start and then realised through their mentoring conversations the information they did not know – resulting in them recording a more realistic response at the end of the project and therefore recording a negative change. However, coupled with the fact that the undecided Y13s also recorded notable negative individual change in their knowledge and awareness of what university study and student life is like (discussed in the previous section), this does highlight a need for future projects to support the development of human capital more for this mentee type. For example, signposting mentors to more introductory conversation topics and resources around future pathways, and providing more advice for supporting mentees to consider the long-term options linked to different post-18 pathways.

#### 4.2.3 Hope

Linked to the project-specific outcome around feeling confident that they will have a positive HE experience, we also asked mentees a more general question around hope: how far they agreed with the statement ‘I feel positive about my future’.

**The overall change at group level was an increase of 3 percentage points.**

The graph below shows the change at the individual level:



While it is good to see 24% of mentees experiencing an increase in hope through the survey, monitoring conversation data and reading mentee responses to the exit survey creates an impression that a higher proportion of mentees did feel more hopeful about the future. In addition, later in the survey (included in section 5 of this report) 97% of respondents agreed or strongly to the question on quality – that conversations helped them to feel more optimistic about the future. The quotes below are just a small selection that allude to these themes:

- *“She gave me a much more positive insight and helped me reframe my perspective in a more hopeful way!”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE)
- *“Increased my confidence and made me more optimistic about the future. I was in a very dark place in March, April time and my mental health has improved as I had someone to talk to about my worries.”*  
(Y13 and undecided about next steps)
- *“Feeling less worried and anxious because I could talk to my mentor about anything I was worried about regarding uni.”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, Uni Connect postcode, POLAR4 Q2)
- *“I gained more clarity on how University life will look like, thus I am less worried than when I started.”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, POLAR4 Q2)
- *“My Brightside mentor was brilliant it was lovely to talk regularly and she answered every single question I had and made me feel less anxious about my next step.”*  
(Mature, POLAR4 Q2, First generation)
- *“I feel more positive about my future and its okay to not know what I am doing as lots of people are in the same boat.”*  
(Y12, POLAR4 Q2, Learners with a disability)

The graph above shows that 61% of respondents recorded no change. Only 13% gave the maximum score at the start and end, leaving 48% who could have progressed on hope but did not, which seems surprising given the overwhelming agreement mentioned above to the quality statement. Given the chaotic external environment caused by Covid-19, complexity around how hopeful mentees feel is perhaps to be expected, so this is worth exploring further.

The mentee type breakdown helps us here, with a much higher proportion of Y13s who were undecided about their next steps recording a positive increase on hope than other mentees (55%). Mature learners expecting to start HE had the highest proportion of negative change at 19%. We should note the general scope of the question: ‘I feel positive about the future’. It does not specify the HE experience, or the mentor-mentee relationship, as the other questions relating to hope do. All this may suggest that external factors to do with the HE environment continue to present significant concern for mentees expecting to start courses, and that Prepare for HE did not completely alleviate these overall worries for all mentees. The power of those external factors is captured well in these quotes from a mentee and a mentor:

- *“A lot of things have happened this year and I feel I have not done enough or have been offered support from those I need to be fully prepared... My Brightside mentor has supported me and offered me help where I was giving none and answered all my questions and for that I am grateful because they have added a lot of guidance to my decision.”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, Uni Connect postcode, POLAR4 Q1, Free School Meals)
- *“I think the pandemic has created a lot of anxiety and uncertainty which has made the thought of beginning higher education more scary for my mentees.”*  
(Mentor)

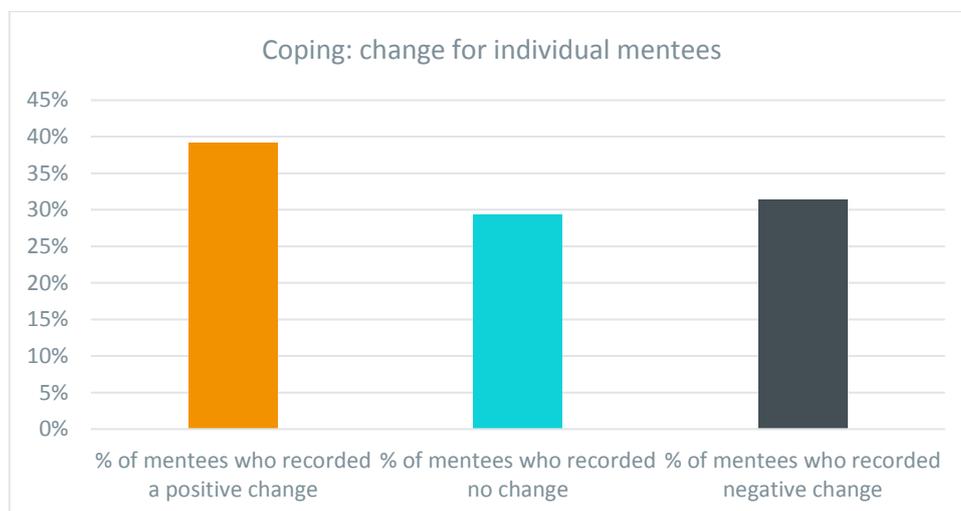
This analysis of the scores for hope further underlines the need for mentees to have multiple sources of support at such a challenging time, and the importance of the extension opportunity for some mentees who were finding their mentor particularly helpful.

#### 4.2.4 Coping

Mentees were asked to give a rating on a scale of 0-10 for how easily they feel they can deal with problems that come up in their life.

**The overall change at group level shows an increase of 2 percentage points.**

The graph below shows the proportion of mentees who recorded a positive change for this outcome:



Along with self-efficacy (discussed below), coping has the lowest level of no change and highest level of negative change of the Theory of Change outcomes. Positively, 39% of mentees experienced an increase in coping, and the quotes below show what some mentoring pairs worked on together:

- *“It's made me feel more confident about how I'll be able to cope with the university setting.”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, Uni Connect postcode, POLAR4 Q1, Learners with a disability, First generation)

- *“How to cope with things like money and big life changes etc... some knowledge on what to expect going into uni and how to cope with any issues and emotional support.”*  
(Mature, POLAR4 Q2)
- *“We discussed living at uni, house sharing, social life and coping mechanisms.”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, IMD Q1, Learners with a disability, First generation)

However, a similar proportion (31%) recorded a negative change.

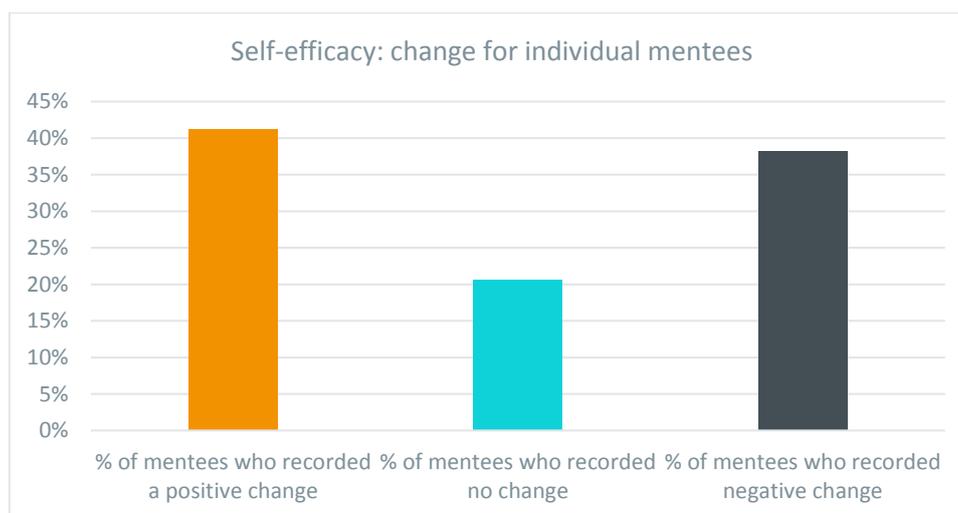
When comparing mentee types, mature learners had the highest proportion recording positive change for hope (45%) and undecided Y13s recorded the highest proportion of negative change (64%).

The additional challenges, stress and difficult situations caused by the Covid-19 pandemic are likely to have been felt more by Y13 mentees than mature learners because of the chaos and uncertainty around results, grades and university places. As an outcome, feelings about coping with difficult situations is very likely to have been negatively affected by the external environment which could have contributed to the notable proportion of Year 13 mentees recording a negative change. We should acknowledge that this was a more disruptive and unexpected time for mentees and the behavioural outcomes would likely have been affected. This being said, here is another example of notable negative change for the undecided Y13s, adding more weight to the argument for focusing more on appropriate support for this group in future programmes.

#### 4.2.5 Self-efficacy

**The overall change at group level shows no movement.**

This is due to the significant and similar proportions of individual mentees recording positive and negative change as shown in the graph below:



Again, there is some encouraging data here with 41% of mentees experiencing an increase in self-efficacy. However, the proportion recording negative change is concerning, at 38%.

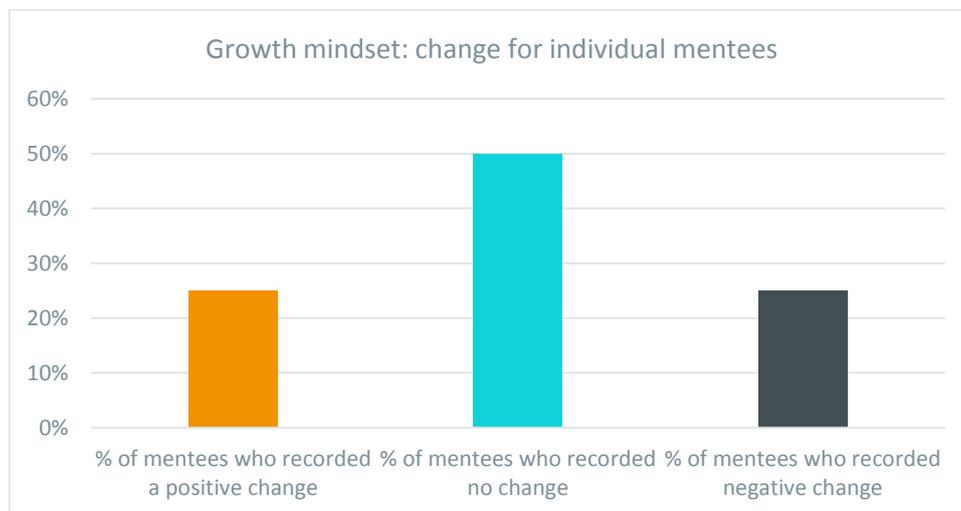
This is another outcome where undecided Y13 mentees have worse impact scores than the other mentees; 23% recorded positive change and 55% recorded negative change for self-efficacy. A notable portion of negative change is reasonably consistent with Brightside’s experience on other programmes. There is an argument to suggest that if mentees gain more information and insight into HE or other human capital through talking to a mentor (i.e. they understand the complexity of the choice facing them) then they become more aware of what they don’t know, hence a limited or negative change score in self-efficacy.

As with coping, these outcomes are also likely to be more negatively affected by the pandemic than other outcomes, and the data suggests that future mentoring projects should look at helping mentors to identify where mentees’ coping or self-efficacy may be fluctuating or low during a programme, and focus on this development with them.

### Growth mindset

#### The overall change at group level shows no movement.

Again, the overall lack of change is due to similar proportions of mentees recording positive and negative change as shown in the graph below.

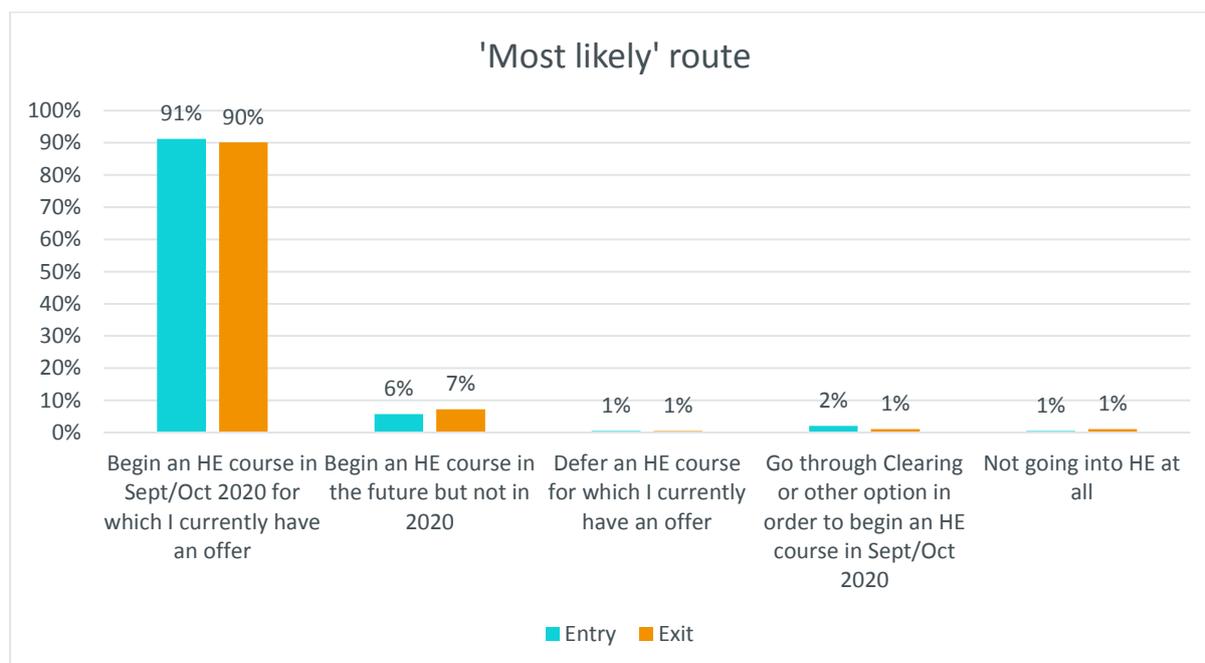


However, compared to coping and self-efficacy, this outcome had a much higher proportion of mentees recording no change (50%). Once more, though, we see undecided mentees as recording negative change in higher proportions than other mentee types, at 45% compared to 26% of mature learners and 22% of Y13s expecting to enter higher education.

**For the capital and behavioural outcomes, this is an interesting set of results that allude to the complex challenges facing young people during this period as well as some of ways in which the Prepare for HE helped. A summary of the results and accompanying recommendations can be found in section 7 of this report.**

### 4.3 Decision-making and confidence

The final outcome measured through baseline and exit surveys is how confident mentees feel about their next steps in education or careers. The graph below shows the pathways mentees ranked as 'most likely' at the start and end of the project, based on 193 mentees who responded to the question:



There was minimal shift in the group, with mentees starting HE courses in 2020 remaining the most popular response for the overwhelming majority. Only 8% of mentee respondents (15 people) gave a different answer at the end of Prepare for HE. Recruitment was specifically targeted at offer holders and those considering university and mentees opted in to this project, therefore these results are not surprising. This being said, it is encouraging to see that most mentees were still planning to go enter HE after a summer of disruption and uncertainty, and continued questions over what the experience would be like for new students this year. These intentions reported by mentees are reflective of UCAS reports on participation over the period, which in April showed almost nine out of ten undergraduate applicants in the UK had not changed their mind about wanting to start HE in 2020<sup>4</sup>, and in June showed more applicants holding a firm offer to start a course this autumn than at the equivalent point last year, and fewer people accepting an offer for a deferred place.<sup>5</sup>

Although the majority of mentees did not change their most likely pathway, some of those that did elaborated on their decision in their survey responses. The three examples below outline how their mentors contributed to their decisions:

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/level-students-still-setting-their-sights-undergraduate-study>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/rise-number-students-planning-start-university-autumn>

**Mentee 1:** Y13 mentee who started the programme expecting to take up a place in 2020 for which they had an offer, and changed their mind to still enter HE in the future but not this year:

- Baseline survey:  
*“I don’t think I’ll get the grades for my firm choice. I am unsure whether I am choosing the right degree for me.”*
- Exit survey:  
*“I want to improve my grades this year and job prospects as well as developing myself personally this year. I am quite confident this is the right decision for me.... My mentor went through the experience herself of resitting and applying to her dream uni the following year. My mentor gave me confidence to speak to my parents about a gap year, which they were previously against. After explaining, they agreed. This couldn't have been done without my mentor and I am very grateful :)”*

**Mentee 2:** Y13 mentee who started the programme expecting to go through clearing for HE entry in 2020, and ended with the plan to still enter HE in the future but not this year:

- Baseline survey:  
*“As I was unable to hold any offers for the 2020 dentistry courses I plan on taking a gap year or try getting in through clearing which is quite rare.”*
- Exit survey:  
*“I was able to talk to mentors in the field I am interested in studying and they were helpful and gave amazing advice! I was able to talk to them about personal statements, ucat and university life in general. It made my decision in pursuing the course even further.”*

**Mentee 3:** Y13 mentee who started the programme expecting to take up a place in 2020 for which they had an offer, and decided to defer by the end:

- Baseline survey:  
*“Thinking of taking a gap year due to current situation and working instead as it will be half taught online and social distancing will be in place.”*
- Exit survey:  
*“My mentor helped me clarify my decision my offering advice and resources to further research... Talked about future and gained confidence about my decision to defer.”*

Even if they did not change their mind about their most likely next step, other mentees also found it useful to discuss different post-18 options with their mentors, such as this mentee:

- *“My mentor was really really helpful and supportive throughout the program, I've had a lot to deal with over this year and wasn't too sure what was the best option for me to do next. Being able to talk about different options such as a gap year was really useful as it wasn't something I intended doing at all previously.”*  
(Y13 and undecided about next steps, Uni Connect postcode, POLAR4 Q1, First generation)

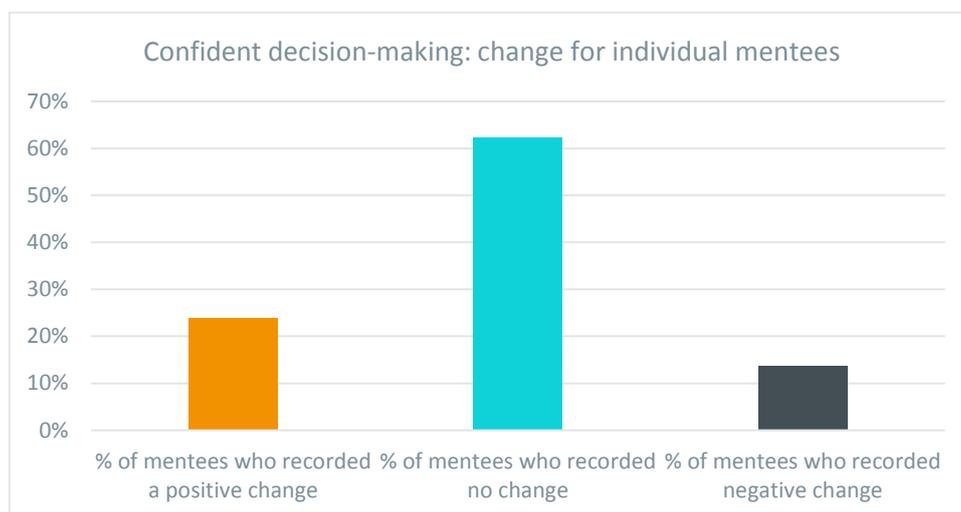
This qualitative data speaks to Brightside’s mission of helping young people make confident and informed decisions. In the examples above, where mentees had decided to defer or delay entering HE, their comments indicate that the decisions are coming from a more confident and informed place.

### Confidence in decision

To understand this confidence even more, we also asked mentees how confident they felt that this decision was right for them.

**The overall change in confidence in the decision at group level was an increase of 3 percentage points.**

The graph below shows the proportion of mentees who recorded a change in confidence around their decision:

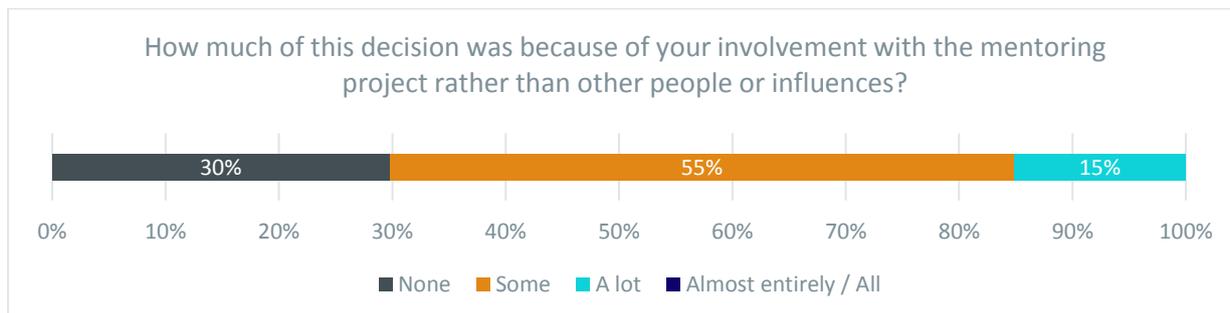


On an individual level, 24% of respondents felt more confident in their decision at the end than at the beginning. 62% showed no change in confidence that the decision was right for them, with 26% saying ‘extremely confident’ at the start and the end, meaning that they may have gained confidence which was not recorded.

36% of respondents could have become more confident but stayed the same, and 14% felt less confident. This is not necessarily surprising, as this year more than ever, there are challenges and uncertainties for mentees entering HE that would understandably prevent them from feeling ‘extremely’ confident, such as online learning, socially distanced campuses and restrictions on social life.

### The role of mentoring in decision-making

Although the majority did not change their mind about their next step, and a significant proportion did not end the programme feeling ‘extremely confident’ in their decision, a high proportion of mentees agreed that the mentoring project had influenced their decision:



70% said that Prepare for HE contributed to their decision about what to do next, at least in part, and there was a high number of comments relating to this on the exit survey. A particularly common theme was how mentoring confirmed mentees' decisions and helped to increase their confidence by providing reassurance, and here is a small selection of the quotes provided:

- *"A sense of reassurance that I made the right decision for myself. Calmed me down a lot and made me a lot less nervous about moving away."*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, First generation)
- *"I was strongly inclined on beginning an HE course for few years now. However, my mentor offered me much needed assurance and confidence that I am on the right path."*  
(Mature, Uni Connect postcode, POLAR4 Q1)
- *"She was so so helpful calming my nerves and making me feel more prepared to enter uni. I feel less scared and more certain of my decision."*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, Uni Connect postcode, POLAR4 Q2, Learners with a disability, First generation)
- *"My mentor made me a lot calmer about moving to university and reassured me on anything I was feeling particularly anxious about. It was really lovely speaking to someone who had already been through it all and someone who I could ask any questions to. Also reassured me by making me confident in the choices I was making rather than where other people thought I should be."*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, First generation)

As well as reassurance and confidence building, some comments highlight how, for some mentees who may have entered the project already feeling confident in their decision, conversations with their mentor actually made them realise what they did not know:

- *"There's so much I didn't know and didn't realise I needed to know. Through the conversations we had I discovered a lot and received a lot of advice about higher education."*  
(Mature, POLAR4 Q1)
- *"My mind was already made up. But though the mentoring I discovered I didn't know what was in store for me by going to university. I was clueless about how different my life would be. My mentor was excellent in reassuring me that everything was going to be fine and told me everything about what to expect. My mentor also gave me extremely valuable advice on*

*how to navigate higher education and how to get the most out of my university experience.”*  
(Mature, POLAR4 Q1)

Other qualitative responses from mentees mentioned how mentors had provided information as well as reassurance to boost their confidence in their decision, for example:

- *“The reason why I feel confident is because I feel like my Brightside mentor has helped me understand what to expect from HE and life as a university student. They've helped me know what to expect from campus life and the type of work to expect.”*  
(Mature, POLAR4 Q2, Learners with a disability)
- *“It was really beneficial to speak to someone who understands the struggles and my course who could help reassure and give actually useful, honest, actionable advice. I think I gained both confidence and knowledge and feel more secure in my choice going forward.”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, Uni Connect postcode, POLAR4 Q2, Learners with a disability, First generation)
- *“My mentor helped me decide which uni to go by talking through the things to consider when going to do a undergraduate degree, she also helped me by giving me useful information and related links. She also helped me feel less stressed about moving from sixthform to university saying it's normal to be scared of change and that I'm not the only one. I'm really glad I registered for Brightside :).”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, POLAR4 Q2, First generation, Free School Meals)

The mentee feedback also includes examples of mentors supporting mentees in their ability to make decisions even when they had not made a concrete choice about their next steps by the end of the project, showing how mentors helped to develop mentees decision-making skills in general:

- *“Although I don't have a set path for my future still, being able to talk about different possibilities with my mentor has really helped and ensured me no matter with path I choose I'm prepared for it.”*  
(Y13 and undecided about next steps, Uni Connect postcode, POLAR4 Q1, First generation)
- *“Learning that as long as I do something I like I will succeed.”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, POLAR4 Q2, First generation, Free School Meals)

### **Other influences**

Alongside several mentee quotes highlighting the impact of mentoring on their decision-making, many mentees shared the other influences that impacted their decision, including the influence of friends, family and teachers. These help to explain the understandable reason why the majority of mentees said mentoring had had ‘some’ or ‘a lot’ of influence as opposed to being the only influence.

- *“My school teachers and support staff helped me in making my decision by showing me what paths are available to me and where each leads. My mentor helped by clearing some doubts I had about entering HE.”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, Uni Connect postcode, POLAR4 Q2)

- *“My mentor answered lots of questions I had about uni which helped me in my preparation. I have had a lot of support in my decision from the people I work with and my family.”*  
(Mature, POLAR4 Q2, First generation)
- *“My family have been very supportive in my decision, and my mentor studied medicine, which gave me an insight into doing a similar course.”*  
(‘Other’ mentee, First generation)

The overall aim of Prepare for HE was to support mentees to transition successfully into HE. The proportion of mentees planning to enter HE (92%), the proportion who felt the programme had influenced their decision (70%) and the wealth of qualitative data around decision-making indicates that this aim has been particularly well-addressed and helped mentees feel more confident as they embark on their HE studies. The HEAT data returned in 2021 will add to these findings and provide hard evidence around successful transition for participants.

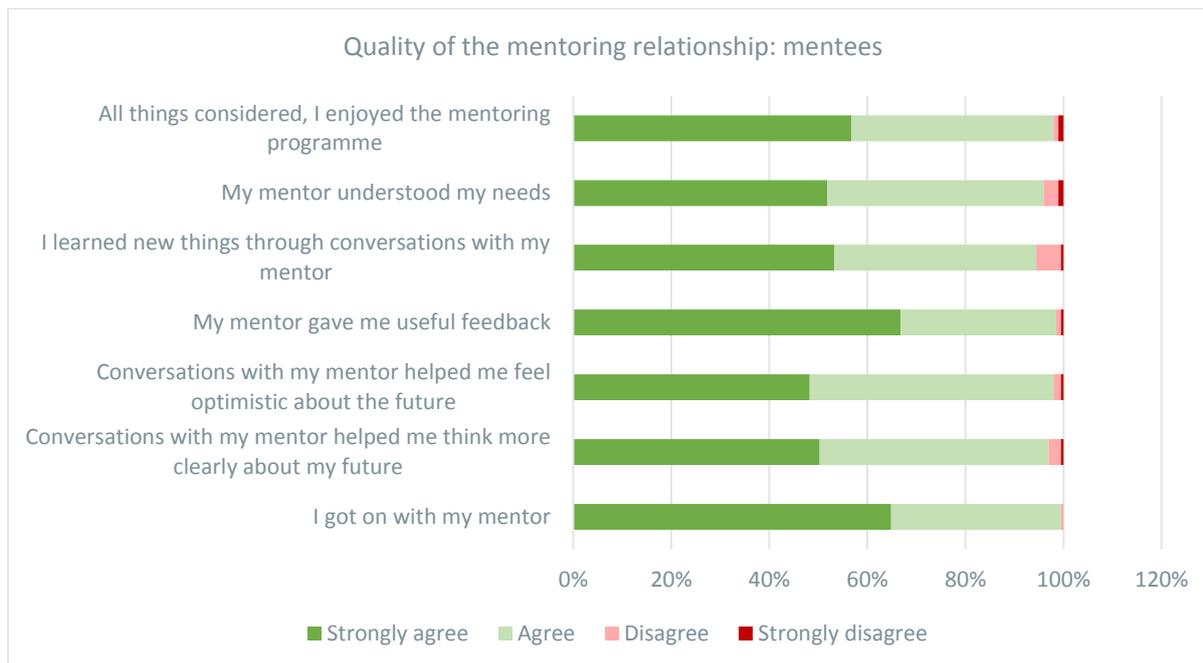
## 5. Quality of the experience

### 5.1 Mentees

As well as having a positive impact, it is important for mentees to have a positive experience of mentoring. The exit survey therefore asks mentees about the quality of their mentoring experience. Mentees who completed the exit survey provided a Net Promoter Score of 44 (equating to ‘good’) and this overall positive experience comes through in more of the qualitative feedback:

- *“I think Brightside is really good at what it does and would really like to become a mentor myself.”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, Learners with a disability, First generation)
- *“One word... BRILLIANT! it's really helped me by speaking to someone who has been in my position & answered all my questions and concerns and made me feel less anxious!”*  
(Mature, POLAR4 Q2, First generation)

The graph below shows how far mentees agreed with specific questions about their relationship with their mentor and the experience they had:



Mentees reported high-quality relationships, with 98% enjoying the programme and 99% feeling they got on with their mentor. With over 90% agreeing to all of the above statements, the data demonstrates an overwhelmingly positive experience from the mentees who responded to the exit survey, many of whom provided specific examples of what made the experience so beneficial to them. The quotes below speak particularly to the relationship they built up with their mentors and how mentors shared their experience:

- *“My mentor helped me to understand and bridge the gap between FE and HE. I feel more relaxed about starting uni and life beyond, having learnt more about how my mentor has managed this time.”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, First generation)
- *“My mentor is doing everything I hope to do in the next few years, and her insight and support has greatly influenced how I expect to plan and execute the next few years of Higher Education to ensure I can be the best version of myself.”*  
(Y13 expecting to start HE, Uni Connect postcode, POLAR4 Q1)
- *“My Brightside mentor helped me a lot with things I was worrying about e.g. not being able to make friends and made me feel more confident about going to uni. She also related to me in lots of topics and this made me feel like I wasn’t the only one worrying.”*  
(Mature, POLAR4 Q1, First generation)
- *“I think the key message which resounds in my head from my mentor was that I earned my place on my forthcoming degree.”*  
(Mature, First generation)

Mentees’ qualitative feedback reinforces the positive quantitative results on the quality of the mentoring experience. It is encouraging to see such positive relationships formed between mentors and mentees and the depth that these relationships have reached. The lack of negative feedback in the quantitative quality data and the comments is notable considering some of the impact outcomes

that had recorded negative change. It suggests that these mentees did not feel mentoring had had a negative impact on them.

In their feedback, the respondents suggest that mentors build a quality mentoring experience through sharing detailed guidance with mentees and through their relatability. Mentees were able to choose their own mentors through the mentor-matching tool, and the references to relatability and similar experiences suggest that this tool worked successfully in creating positive mentoring relationships.

Alongside their positive experiences, mentees also suggested their own recommendations to continue to enhance mentoring provision at Brightside, the themes of which are summarised below with relevant quotes:

- Faster response times from their mentors  
*“Quicker reply times from both me and my mentor however it understandable that we were both busy”* (Y13 expecting to start HE, IMD Q1, Learners with a disability, Young Carer, Free School Meals)
- The opportunity to take part in video calls with their mentors  
*“The option to talk face to face over video with our mentors.”* (Y13 expecting to start HE, IMD Q2, Learners with a disability, First generation)
- The opportunity to learn from other mentors on the programme  
*“Opportunity to speak to multiple mentors.”* (Y13 expecting to start HE)
- The opportunity to match with a mentor from their intended university  
*“I wish they were from my university.”* (Y13 expecting to start HE, Learners with a disability, First generation)
- Further topic ideas for discussion  
*“More advice on topics to discuss with my mentor.”* ((Y13 expecting to start HE, POLAR4 Q1)

Out of these recommendations, Brightside is currently investigating the potential for video integration with the mentoring platform. Brightside already has features that allow mentees to learn from other mentors which were not utilised in this project, but could be considered if the project was to be repeated.

## 5.2 Mentors

While the purpose of Prepare for HE was to support mentees, it's important that mentors have a quality experience so that they develop their own skills and are more likely to continue volunteering in future. Therefore, we administered an exit survey for mentors to understand the quality of the programme from their perspective. Mentors were asked about the quality of their mentoring relationship, support that they received from Brightside and their experience as a mentor. With the low response rate for mentors, we should note that these results may not represent the experience of the whole mentor pool.

Overall, mentors provided the mentoring experience with an Net Promoter Score of 54, considered 'excellent'. 96% of mentors rating their experience at a 7/10 or above.

### Relationship with mentees

96% of mentor respondents felt that they had a positive impact on the mentees that engaged with them on the programme, with 93% agreeing that they were able to build a positive relationship with

engaged mentees. 93% of mentors also agreed that they were the right match for their mentees and mentors commented on the importance of matching for a quality mentoring relationship which further underlines the usefulness of the matching tool which allowed mentees to choose a mentor from a shortlist of five profiles that aligned to their own needs and interests:

- *“I felt the relationship I had with both mentees were strong due to having interest in the same sectors of working with children, education and health and social care”*
- *“I had a really good relationship with two out of three of me mentees. The third mentee did not engage with the project unfortunately, but I felt I was encouraging to the best of my abilities despite this. I got on very well with the other two - I felt we were matched very well and had a natural rapport.”*

Mentors generally saw positive engagement from their mentees on the programme, with 68% of mentor respondents agreeing that their mentees were well engaged and responded consistently to messages. In their qualitative feedback, mentors provided mixed responses about engagement on the programme:

- *“All my mentees were engaged pretty much throughout the project - i.e. responding to messages, generally without prompting messages being required, and with specific and varied questions. This is better than previous e-mentoring projects I’ve done, where mentee engagement has been a lot more varied.”*
- *“My mentee stopped engaging after first message and never told me why, she was a mature student with lots of caring responsibilities so priorities might have changed for her.”*
- *“On the most part my mentees were not engaged with the project- very infrequent replies and they didn’t really ask me any questions. Most of the time I volunteered some advice or information I thought might be useful but then they weren’t interested in any follow up questions. It often felt quite one-sided.”*

While there was high engagement overall from mentees as demonstrated earlier in this evaluation, some of the mentors who completed the mentor exit survey clearly had fewer interactions with their mentees than the average of the project. One mentor surmised that responsibilities during the coronavirus pandemic may have been responsible for a lack of engagement from some mentees.

Brightside measures engagement in terms of the number of messages sent. To understand engagement beyond the quantity of messages, Brightside asked mentors to suggest what it means to say a mentee is ‘engaged’:

- *“Those who engaged were regular responders to messages who asked questions and shared specific questions and concerns. I enjoyed researching on their behalf”*
- *“My interpretation of an ‘engaged mentee’ is someone who is passionate and interested in their subject, which makes all the difference if a mentor can scaffold their knowledge further.”*
- *“Making an effort and being honest and kind is what I would say an ‘engaged mentee’ is.”*
- *“Those who engaged were regular responders to messages who asked questions and shared specific questions and concerns”*

In addition to sending messages, the mentors suggest that these messages need to be regular and include questions that help the mentor research further. Mentors are looking for passion that they can ‘scaffold’ and build from, as well as someone who makes an effort. In future projects, Brightside should add “mentor expectations” to mentee training sessions, induction materials and/or welcome packs, so that mentees can understand what their mentors expect from them (not just what Brightside expect). However, we should consider that some mentees may not be confident or may not have clear aspirations, and so any changes should not apply pressure in this area. Furthermore, we could also look more at managing mentor expectations in training, and helping them relate to mentees who may be less confident and/or unsure of their motivations and goals.

### **Support from Brightside**

Overall, mentors felt satisfied with their support from Brightside. 96% of respondents found the platform easy to use, though some mentors did comment that automatic engagement reminders (where the platform sends an automatic reminder to reply to a message) did not take messages pending in moderation into account. This meant that some mentors were being reminded to send messages where they had already replied. One mentor also noted that mentor group chats were ‘heavily underutilised’ and that input from Brightside, rather than relying on mentors, could have helped make these a better support mechanism for mentors. Recommendations for future projects are therefore to:

- Update automatic engagement reminders to take into account messages that may be pending in moderation, to avoid reminding mentors who are engaging consistently with the programme.
- Consider how mentor group chats can be better utilised on future projects to enhance the mentoring experience.

78% of mentors respondents agreed that the Brightside team answered their questions promptly when they have them, with 96% of respondents agreeing that they knew where to go if they had questions or needed additional support:

- *“I found the team to be extremely helpful and when I had a safeguarding issue with one of my mentees, the team offered me support for myself and also guided me through what to say and the issue seemed to be resolved quickly.”*
- *“Even though I struggled to keep my mentees engaged, the Brightside team was so helpful and offered quick advice on how to get them talking again. Overall I really enjoyed the project despite the lack of engagement, and this was mainly due to Brightside’s consistently positive attitude, honesty and dedication- it made me want to keep trying!”*

Some mentors suggested that Brightside should add additional content to support students who were more ‘sure’ about their future pathways, which echoes earlier observations about this undecided group and the room for improvement when it comes to the impact outcomes.

While the majority of mentors agreed that Brightside offered prompt and helpful advice, one mentor said that responses from the team were not always consistent if they were alerting Brightside to a disengaged mentee. Brightside should ensure to keep mentors in the loop with any work being done with mentees around engagement so that mentors feel included.

### Skills and development

93% of mentor respondents agreed that they can use their experience with Brightside on their CV or job applications and 79% felt their experience had helped them to develop professionally. 86% of respondents felt that they learned new skills, with 86% of respondents also agreeing that their confidence in working with young people increased by taking part.

Mentors noted that they found the experience 'rewarding' due to the coronavirus epidemic and that the experience of mentoring was 'enjoyable'. One mentor in particular noted Brightside's approach as being a key factor in their enjoyment of the project:

- *"I've loved mentoring. I truly love that Brightside don't interfere too much as it shows that they really trust us mentors and that's really special. I'm grateful for that. I definitely wouldn't gel with Brightside if they ever turned rigid/ stern about how to go about mentoring, and there were too many rules and limits. In that instance I just wouldn't return. I love being able to contact the team for support if I felt I needed it, and I think having moderators is a really good and important middle ground."*

Finally, one mentor made reference to the extension of the project which allowed mentees to continue with their mentor beyond the September 21<sup>st</sup> end date. The mentor noted that this made the initial project end date feel like a 'non-finish' and was potentially confusing to mentees. This mentor stated that more upfront knowledge about an extension would have been helpful to them in offering further support to their mentees. In future projects where extensions are likely, Brightside should discuss this opportunity with mentors during training as well as checking in with them before offering extensions to mentees, to understand where they may or not may not be availability.

## 6. Impact of Covid-19

The results discussed earlier, showing that 90% of mentees intended to start HE courses in 2020, suggest that for the vast majority, the pandemic did not prevent them from pursuing HE. Furthermore, of the 13 mentees who did not feel confident in their decision (or were not sure how confident they felt), none of them explicitly referred to the pandemic when explaining their answer.

For many mentees, the fact that the pandemic did not determine their decision may be because they had mentoring (and other support) to draw on. An insight into how the pandemic affected their thoughts, feelings and attitudes towards HE can still help identify areas for future pre-arrival projects to focus on, as well as highlight areas of support that mentees may need as they start their courses and go through their first year.

When doing a key word search within mentee messages, we found that only 7% of mentee messages (393 messages) contained one of these words relating specifically to the pandemic:

- Covid
- Corona
- Coronavirus
- Pandemic
- Covid-19
- Lockdown

However, reading a selection of messages, it is clear that many mentoring pairs discussed the situation using a huge range of different words and phrases, such as ‘the current situation’, and ‘the government’s plans’, and references to things like online learning. We can use qualitative data (survey responses and message content) to learn about mentees’ thoughts and feelings around HE in relation to the pandemic. Here are the key themes we noted from our analysis of the data, which included observations from mentors shared in their exit survey comments:

1. **Concerns about results:** many mentees felt more nervous as a result of calculated grades being used. There were multiple references to uncertainty too – mentees having no idea what to expect.
  - *“The stress around exam results was definitely worse, for those it effected, because of the pandemic.”* (Mentor exit survey)
  - *“I’ve no idea of my results for HE due to COVID-19 so have no idea of whether I’ll pass or have to go through clearing.”* (Mentee baseline survey)
  - *“I have an offer on the condition I pass my maths course, due to the pandemic I have not sat an exam.”* (Mentee baseline survey)
  - *I am a little bit nervous about results day, I think I would've felt more confident had I sat my exams. I worked really hard throughout my time at college. I also took an EPQ in my last year which definitely made managing my time a lot harder. I'm more concerned that the results I get awarded won't reflect what I have put in/ won't be like my predicted grades.”* (Mentee message to their mentor)
  - *“I'm not really sure what grades I'll come out with. I suffer with quite severe exam stress anyway and all the uncertainty has made it worse!”* (Mentee message to mentor)
  - *“Results day is on Thursday and I am super nervous! I have been keeping up with the news recently and an article was published stating that around 40% of students will receive lower grade predictions from their teachers which is really worrying.”* (Mentee message to mentor)
  
2. **The impact of results day:** even once results were in, lots of mentees then dealt with stress and disappointment because of the grades they had been awarded.
  - *“I got my results today and I have to admit I am really disappointed and was a results day disaster... I was shocked when opening the email and my family couldn't believe it either. I got downgraded in two subjects from my teacher predicted grades after I talked to them today. they said the ofqual algorithm was responsible.. for maths I got moved from an e to a U (I know it was shocking, I expected to get AAD overall). Had the algorithm have not happened it would have helped me get my insurance choice at least. It is shocking how badly the government has managed this situation and the poor appeals process. As soon as I saw the U, it put me off clearing completely and was frankly an insult for two years of work.”* (Mentee message to mentor)
  - *“Aw thankyou! Yesterday I was feeling a little down because I felt like maybe I didn't deserve the results just since I technically didn't even do the paper. But now I feel better because it's just the circumstances right now, I can't help that.”* (Mentee message to mentor)
  - *“Results day didn't go well for me as I was downgraded and missed out on my chosen university. I've been offered a few places through clearing but they have said I only have*

*2 days to confirm my place but I want to wait till I've appealed my grades and hopefully go to my chosen university. It's an awful situation." (Mentee message to mentor)*

### 3. Feeling daunted, nervous or disappointed about online learning

- *"I think the biggest impact from the pandemic is switching to online learning because the mentees are used to learning in the classroom environment, therefore online learning is and maybe still daunting for them." (Mentor exit survey)*
- *"I think because of Covid-19 there's so much uncertainty at the moment of what's going to happen with university and the possibility of the next few years being online as I have been struggling to do this in A-levels." (Mentee baseline survey)*
- *"Due to COVID I don't know weather the uni will be opening or going virtual, and if so is there any point paying for online learning where I may have to teach myself the subjects." (Mentee baseline survey)*
- *"As for questions I would like to know if there is anything, I could do to help me with online learning since my university has said most of my classes will be online, but I personally find online learning hard. Since I struggle to focus with online lessons." (Mentee message to mentor)*

### 4. Nerves around social aspects of HE

- *"I am a little worried about the workload and making new friends which could be even harder as a result of covid due to social distancing, and how freshers week will be run etc." (Mentee message to their mentor)*
- *"I think I am going to deffer. I have been looking at the different societies and accommodation but alot of things will be different this year and with social distancing societies won't be the same or won't take place." (Mentee message to mentor)*
- *"It's the socialising aspect that worries me, as I have gotten used to online learning in the last term of school, but I don't know how getting to know my peers would go if we are all quarantined." (Mentee message to mentor)*

While these were the main themes threading through lots of qualitative data, there were additional references to the pandemic creating a lack of uncertainty around what to expect from HE life, a lack of confidence in decision-making, and financial concerns. Here are some examples:

- *"I know about what to expect from uni now, which is great because this lockdown period kept me in the dark for a while." (Mentee exit survey)*
- *"Corona has really made the decision difficult. It's hard to know what the right decision is and I have no one to talk to who knows what it's like to be in the same position." (Mentee baseline survey)*
- *"Anxious about the impact of COVID-19 and how this will influence the possibility of getting a job whilst studying." (Mentee baseline survey)*
- *"I'm quite nervous about starting while this whole pandemic is going on. I know that either way I will be moving in, in september but the idea of being in a new place while having to social distance and worry about all that on top of trying to find my place at uni is all quite overwhelming! I really wish everything was back to normal come september." (Mentee message to their mentor)*

Although many mentees' feelings regarding HE were affected negatively by the pandemic, there were also plenty of examples of mentees not being particularly concerned or impacted, or even if they were, still feeling positive about the experience:

- *“For my mentees not much. They had all planned to study from home anyway and didn't seeme fazed by the potential changes.”* (Mentor exit survey)
- *“Yeah I feel so comfortable and determined to start uni now, especially with the pandemic. I'm just so eager to meet new people and socialise again!”* (Mentee message to their mentor)
- *“I'm still really excited about the idea of moving in though, the idea of herds and online hasn't changed that... I would love to know what you think of the 'herd' idea. I'm excited, I hope I get along with all the people in my group. Maybe I can invite some people from my herd to do online study with me?”* (Mentee message to mentor)
- *“I am excited for university and I have joined some whatsapp groups for my accommodation and freshers for the university. I have also been sent an email by the university stating that there will be a combination of face to face as well as online teaching and support. They have also explained measures they are placing for social distancing and limiting the amount of people in a room as well as ensuring masks are worn.”* (Mentee message to mentor)
- *“I'm not really worried about it because we've obviously been learning online for quite some time.”* (Mentee message to mentor)

**This close look at the qualitative data has shown that the pandemic did not affect mentees' feelings and attitudes towards HE in one particular way – it had a myriad of effects. This being said, concern around calculated grades, the impact of results of the day along with the appeals system, the move to online learning and making friends with social distancing were all concerns clearly felt by a lot of mentees. This learning should be used to inform the support that we – and partners – put in place for students this year, particularly Y13 students who may need to navigate similar challenges in 2021 and Y12 learners, many of whom will be deciding in favour of or against HE in the coming months.**

## **7. Conclusions and recommendations**

### **Recruitment**

Almost 500 learners from across the country received mentoring support, through an efficient, successful and collaborative programme. Accessing mentees through routes connected to their HE offers worked well, with most sign-ups coming from UCAS and universities directly targeting their offer-holders. Recruiting through schools and colleges was particularly challenging, with partners citing the lack of teacher access to learners, and the competing priorities and concerns for teachers, as notable barriers to higher recruitment. Mentor recruitment was highly successful, with more than enough mentors trained and match—ready within a short timeframe. However, a significant proportion remained unmatched due to lower than anticipated mentee numbers.

The targeting of the programme to learners from widening participation backgrounds was a key success, with 90% of learners who signed up met at least one of the targeting criteria. Mentees from all but one of the target groups met or exceeded the overall programme conversion rate, suggesting

that as long as we can access learners from these groups, they see the benefits and want to take part to an equal extent, or even more, than their non-target counterparts.

Recommendations for future projects:

- Continue to **engage UCAS in recruitment efforts**
- Continue to **engage admissions teams** within universities to reach out directly to those holding offers
- Consider **actively recruiting Y13 students who have not applied for HE but who are unsure about their next steps** – and adapting any messaging and materials accordingly using case studies from this year’s cohort
- Set mentee **recruitment targets based on an expected conversion rate** of 40% - 50% (in current climate)

### Conversion

The overall conversion rate was 44%. Although lower than hoped, this compares to a ‘typical’ conversion rate for similar programmes of around 50-60%. Considering the external environment around the pandemic, 44% conversion should not be seen as unsuccessful. Of course, addressing the conversion rate would be a straightforward way to increase the reach and impact of the programme, as the learners have already actively expressed interest in the opportunity. Recommendations for the future are to:

- Consider an **earlier launch date and therefore an earlier recruitment phase**. This may mean that schools and colleges are better placed to promote the opportunity, and students may also have more time and space to work through the process and choose a mentor.
- **Review recruitment and conversion communications and materials** to ensure it is clearer who the mentors are, to manage mentee expectations
- Consider also **recruiting mentors from partner HEIs**, for example Student Ambassadors. This would help diversify the mentor pool even further, and may help a higher number of sign-ups convert
- **Streamline the recruitment and onboarding process**, so that interested mentees can register, create accounts, choose a mentor and start messaging as quickly as possible, perhaps even at the same time

### Engagement

Engagement was excellent, with over 80% of matched mentees meeting the 3+ messaging benchmark and mentees sending an average of 11 messages each. Mature students had lower levels of engagement than Y13 mentees, but the qualitative data shows high-quality, lengthy messages, as well as information suggesting that many of these mentees had considerable family and work commitments. There was some variation in engagement for different target groups, with mentees with disabilities and Young Carers having lower levels of engagement, but those identifying themselves as first generation in their family to attend university and/or eligible for FSM exceeding the overall project stats for all engagement metrics. The extension period – taken up by 43 mentees – was well-engaged.

Even the target groups that had lower proportions of mentees taking part and are traditionally hard to reach engaged well, indicating that this project has successfully met a need and been appropriate for a range of learners including those from less advantaged backgrounds and/or facing additional challenges.

Future projects should:

- **Maintain the tools used this year to encourage and sustain engagement:** mentoring guides, automated engagement reminders and regular communications with suggestions and resources to support mentoring conversations
- Continue to **build in an optional extension for mentees** who still need support as they actually move and settle into HE

### **Impact on project-specific, capital and behavioural outcomes**

Prepare for HE had a particularly positive impact on mentees' knowledge about what to expect from student life, and the key differences in learning and teaching styles, with overall increases of 17pp and 54% of mentees recording positive change for these outcomes. Almost a quarter of mentees recorded an increase in motivation and excitement for their chosen subject, but a significant proportion (33%) gave the maximum score at the start and end, meaning they began the programme with a high level of motivation. 28% of mentees were more confident at the end that they would go on to have a positive HE experience. The results suggest that Prepare for HE is an appropriate and impactful project to support mentees prepare for a successful transition into HE.

The development of social capital is a strength of the project, with almost half (46%) of mentees recording an increase and an overall change of 12pp. The change for mature students was particularly good. Human capital increased a lot at the overall level (+23pp) and 39% of mentees gave the maximum score at the start and end, meaning the individual change could have been greater than shown by the data. The overall score for hope is lower (+3pp). Based on their responses to quality questions and the qualitative feedback, the proportion recording no change for hope is surprising, and looking at the different sets of data together, including breakdowns by mentee type, we can suggest that general feelings of positivity about the future are still significantly affected by the external environment, even though the majority of mentees felt mentoring had helped them feel more optimistic. For self-efficacy and coping, the majority of mentees experienced a change but the proportions on positive and negative change were quite similar, highlighting the fact that mentees' coping and self-efficacy was significantly impacted, in a range of ways, by the project and/or external environment. The quality scores and qualitative feedback does not indicate any concerning negative effects of mentoring, but this is something that should be prioritised in future projects.

Although they made up a small proportion of the mentee group, the impact results highlight a need for more tailored support for Y13 mentees who are unsure about what to do next, if they are recruited onto the programme. This group had the lowest proportion of mentees recording positive change in knowledge around HE, and the highest proportion showing negative change in human capital, coping, self-efficacy and growth mind-set.

Recommendations based on the impact data are as follows:

- **Adapt mentor training, support materials and communications to include more support and signposting for Y13s who are unsure about their next steps.** For example, signposting mentors to more introductory conversation topics and resources around future pathways, and providing more advice for supporting mentees to consider the long-term options linked to different post-18 pathways.
- **Continue to explore additional delivery elements to support mentees' general hope for the future,** such as Brightside's Ask the Expert function and project extensions
- Ensure mentoring guides encourage discussions on the **importance of networking and developing networking skills**
- Find ways to **help mentors to identify where mentees' coping or self-efficacy may be fluctuating or low** during a programme, and focus on this development with them

### Impact on decision-making

92% of mentees did not change their mind about their 'most-likely route' in relation to HE, with 90% agreeing at the end of the programme that they expected to enter HE in 2020. Qualitative data for those that did change their mind suggests that mentoring helped them make a more confident and informed decision. Regarding confidence that their decision was right for them, 36% of respondents could have become more confident but stayed the same, and 14% felt less confident. This is not necessarily surprising, considering the context and additional challenges and uncertainty this year for mentees entering HE.

The data suggests that although mentees may not be feeling 'extremely' confident, mentoring had a hugely positive impact on their decision-making. 70% said that Prepare for HE contributed to their decision about what to do next, with a wealth of qualitative feedback explaining how mentors had provided reassurance and confidence building about the decisions their mentees were making. As well as reassurance, mentees talked about how mentors had provided practical information and tips, and supported their decision-making approach more generally.

### Quality of the experience

Mentees reported very high quality mentoring relationships and overall experience of the programme, with 98% enjoying the programme and 99% feeling they got on with their mentor. Mentors agreed, with 93% of respondents agreeing that they were well-matched, and able to build a positive relationship with those who engaged. Mentees were able to choose their own mentors through the mentor-matching tool, and the references to relatability and similar experiences suggest that this tool worked successfully in creating positive mentoring relationships.

### Recommendations:

- Continue to **monitor and send reminders** about prompt replies
- Continue using the **matching tool** for mentees to select their own mentor
- Explore **ways in which mentees could access support from other mentors** on the project
- Consider the **addition of some video elements** in line with Brightside's developments in this area, if possible
- Add "**mentor expectations**" to **mentee training sessions, induction materials and/or welcome packs**, so that mentees can understand what their mentors expect from them

- **Update automatic engagement reminders** to take into account messages that may be pending in moderation, to avoid reminding mentors who are engaging consistently with the programme
- Consider **how mentor group chats can be better utilised** to enhance the mentoring experience.
- Where extensions are likely, **discuss this with mentors during training as well as checking in with them before offering extensions** to mentees

### **Support for learners during the pandemic**

Conversations and survey responses offer a huge amount of qualitative data to understand the impact of the pandemic on learners' feelings and attitudes towards Higher Education. The evaluation shows that it impacted mentees differently. However, concern around calculated grades, the impact of results of the day along with the appeals system, the move to online learning and making friends with social distancing were all concerns clearly felt by a lot of mentees.

- Recommendation: This learning should be used to inform the support that we – and partners – put in place for students this year, **particularly Y13 students who may need to navigate similar challenges in 2021 and Y12 learners**, many of whom will be deciding in favour of or against HE in the coming months.

## **8. Appendix A: impact data by targeting criteria**