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Impactful Mentoring at The Access Project



Report by Adam Runacres
Impact and Policy Manager

Foreword by Chief Executive Officer Anna Searle

Our mission at The Access Project is to support students from under-resourced backgrounds to access top-third universities by removing barriers to equality of opportunity. We know that access to these universities is not equitable without the right support, and over the last 15 years we have been privileged to work with and support young people who have gone on to create their own stories of success. Our model is successful, and through externally verified impact evaluation and continuous improvement, we are able to refine what we do so that it makes the most difference for young people.

At the heart of our model sits mentoring. This is the aspect that we know drives the most significant impact, and without doubt, a component that our young people and school partners value highly. However, the role of mentoring and its impact can vary widely, depending on context and the relationship between mentors and mentees, taking different forms across a variety of programmes. In this report, our team has considered the difference that our mentoring makes in widening participation, how it can be most effective, what impact we can see from our own programmes and what is next for mentoring at The Access Project. We intend that this report serves as evidence for the impact of mentoring in widening access to higher education and hope it encourages more organisations to invest in high-quality mentoring to improve the lives of young people.



Anna Searle, Chief Executive Officer at The Access Project, speaking at our 15th anniversary celebration, October 2023

Introduction

Mentoring for Widening Access to Higher Education

The Access Project is a social mobility charity dedicated to fighting educational inequality by supporting under-resourced students to access the country's best universities. At The Access Project, we pride ourselves on delivering impactful, individualised mentoring, working in partnership with schools to deliver a programme that builds students' university readiness and removes barriers to equality of opportunity. With 15 years of experience, we believe strongly in the power of expert mentoring to change young peoples' lives for the better. This short report will explore the impact of mentoring for widening access to university, discuss our own mentoring model and what we know works before previewing what is next for mentoring at The Access Project as the charity scales to reach more young people and serve more communities. This introduction will briefly review the evidence base for mentoring in widening access to universities and improving outcomes for young people.

Higher education boosts social mobility with graduates from under-resourced backgrounds likely to enter high income brackets in comparison with their peers who do not attend university. Moreover, attending more selective universities further increases the chances of being socially mobile (Sutton Trust 2021). However, access to these institutions is inequitable with students from affluent backgrounds over-represented at the country's most selective providers, and students from under-resourced backgrounds less likely to attend and enrol due to multiple barriers to equality of opportunity.

This has led to increased attention and activity to widen access to universities. Providing mentoring to prospective applicants is a popular approach, often encompassed within what The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) has called 'Multi-intervention outreach and mentoring' (MIOM) programmes. This presents challenges for evaluating the specific effectiveness of mentoring for university access, especially for producing causal evidence. However, reviews have drawn out some key findings to show both how impactful mentoring can be and what effective mentoring looks like (Robinson and Salvestrini 2020; TASO 2023a,b).



Subilo, former student at The Access Project, now studying at London School of Economics

There is broader evidence from within and outside the UK that mentoring has a positive impact on attainment as well as the social, emotional and behavioural development of young people (DuBois et al. 2002, 2011; Children’s Commissioner & LKMco. 2018; EEF 2021; Gaffney et al. 2022). In the context of access to higher education (HE), Robinson and Salvestrini (2020) conclude that mentoring programmes boost confidence and motivation, raise aspirations and “support students from low participation groups to progress to the most prestigious institutions” (p25). They emphasise the benefits of relationships with experienced mentors within both university settings and professional industries, creating access to networks and cultural capital for those students.

Programme evaluations and research demonstrate that mentoring is more effective when there are sustained, high-quality relationships between mentors and mentees, allowing for high rapport and trust. Moreover, confident, well-trained and well-supported mentors who follow a structured programme with their mentees are also more likely to be impactful (Aimhigher Birmingham and Solihull 2010; J. Sanders & Higham 2012; O’Sullivan et al. 2017). While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to effective mentoring, it is evident that there are benefits for under-resourced students who aspire to attend top universities and build essential skills for the future. In what follows, we will explore our approach to mentoring at The Access Project, what impact we can see and hear directly from students about their experience.



The Access Project students from Darwen Vale High School speaking to a member of staff



The Access Project students on a school trip to the University of Oxford, March 2022



The Access Project students on a school trip to the University of York, February 2024

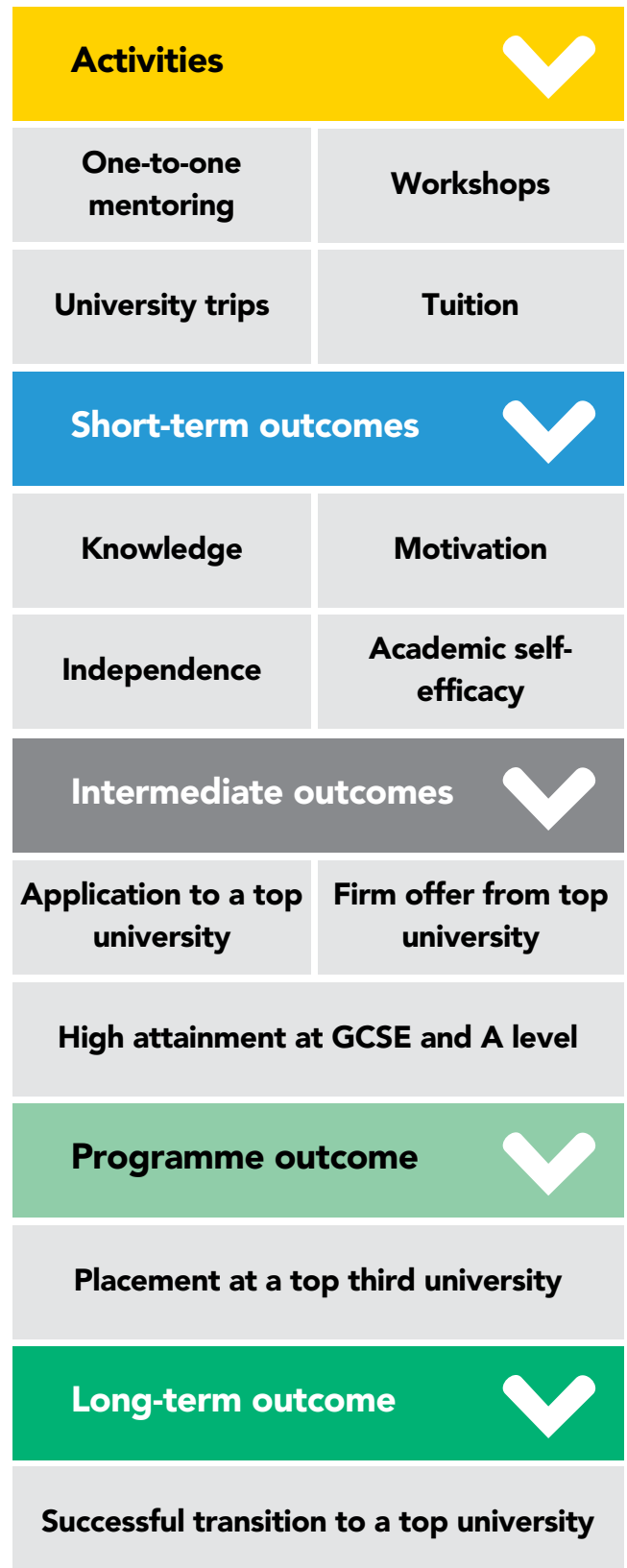
The Access Project's Mentoring Model

Mentoring is a helping relationship based on an exchange of knowledge, experience and goodwill. Mentors help someone less experienced gain confidence, clearer purpose, insight and wisdom.

David Clutterbuck, 2019

At The Access Project, mentoring is at the heart of our programmes. Our expert in-school mentors work with groups of students at our partner schools to deliver one-to-one tailored mentoring sessions on all aspects of the university application process, setting them up for success at school, when applying and in their transition to university. Our theory of change [right] articulates how one-to-one mentoring sessions aim to improve students' knowledge of the university application process, independence to pursue their academic interests, motivation to apply and attend a top university and their academic self-efficacy. This drives applications and offers from top universities, leading to our programme outcome: "placement at a top third university".

Our Theory of Change



Our mentoring model is rooted in the power of informed, purposeful and close mentor-mentee relationships. For us, an effective mentoring relationship features a) high levels of rapport between mentor and mentee and b) high clarity of purpose (Clutterbuck & Megginson 2004). By working directly with young people on an individual basis in their school contexts, our mentors are able to build an open and honest dialogue, empowering mentees to articulate their ambitions and concerns. Mentors tailor their information, advice and guidance to the young person, applying their expertise in university access to help each individual student succeed in their own unique way. In doing so, they are able to address specific risks to equality of opportunity that may affect our students. With reference to the Office for Students' equality of opportunity risk register, this can include risks to knowledge and skills (Risk 1), information and guidance (Risk 2), perception of higher education (Risk 3) and application success rate (Risk 4) as students seek to access university.

As one of our mentors explains, "Your role is unique for every student. It changes throughout their journey in education and their time on the programme. Your role is to listen and support students with their decision-making and next steps. You work with students to develop the skills to address their own challenges and truly believe in their own ability. You are ultimately mentoring students to take the best course of action for themselves".

Mentors and mentees on The Access Project follow a structured programme of university readiness provision, meeting on a regular basis at crucial points along their journey to university.

Our mentors are there every step of the way, from recruiting students to join the programme at the end of Year 9 to supporting and celebrating with them on results day at the end of Year 13. For students at Key Stage 4, meetings focus on building revision skills, making post-16 choices and exploring the world of university through independent research. At Key Stage 5, mentors and mentees meet more frequently, covering how to select degree subjects and university choices, applying to summer schools and access schemes, writing personal statements and finalising applications as well as responding to offers, applying for student finance, and planning for results day. Each meeting has a specific set of aims and a suggested discussion structure. Mentors assess student progress on these aims to personalise their delivery and generate programme-wide insights. These drive improvements to mentoring resources and training as well as shape the development of future programmes. In what follows we ask: what impact does our mentoring have and does it work?



Waleed, former student at The Access Project, now studying at London School of Economics

The Impact of Our Mentoring

Part I: Outcomes and Destinations

At The Access Project, we are proud of the impact of our programmes. Our mission is to help students from under-resourced backgrounds successfully apply to, place at and transition to a top third university. Therefore, to measure impact, we ask ourselves, “does our programme increase the likelihood that a student from an under-resourced background will secure a place at a top-third university?” If the answer is yes, we know that what we are doing works. If the answer is no, we know that we need to make significant changes. In this section of the report, we will look at our impact statistics as well as our mentor and student feedback. Impact is not only measured in percentages and figures, and at The Access Project, we try our best to capture what is working and not working in as many ways as possible.

Our programmes work specifically with students from particular backgrounds. We recognise that there is no one way to measure advantage or level of resource, so we apply multiple overlapping criteria to ensure that we are recruiting from as wide a pool as possible across six regions and over forty schools. To generate impact figures, each year we measure what percentage of our students applied to, received an offer from and placed at a top third university. This helps us to track our success over time and compare across different schools and regions. We validate our application, offer, and placement rates externally using UCAS's Outreach Evaluator service.

As part of this process, UCAS compares the progression rates of students on The Access Project with students from similar backgrounds with similar prior academic achievement, and assesses whether we are having a statistically significant impact on students' access to top universities. This ensures that we have robust evidence that our programme is effective in securing top university places for under-resourced students.

Over the years, our impact evaluation consistently shows that students on The Access Project programmes are almost twice as likely to place at a top university than students from statistically similar backgrounds. Our programmes have continued to deliver results for our students and partner schools, despite the variation in grades and offers from top universities over the years, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2022, the last year for which we have externally validated data, 93% of our students applied to a top third university, 82% received offers and 53% secured their place on results day. In comparison, only 51% of students from statistically similar backgrounds applied to a top university, only 58% received offers and only 33% secured a place when grades were finalised. This success was facilitated by 3,398 hours of one-to-one mentoring meetings and 735 hours of group workshops from our in-school staff. In addition, 305 Year 12 and 280 Year 10 students participated in a trip to a top third university.

In 2022...

More of our students placed at top universities

The Access Project students that placed at a top University

53%

Statistically similar students outside of our programme

33%

Our students were more likely to apply to top universities

The Access Project students that applied to a top university

93%

Statistically similar students outside of our programme

58%

More of our students got offers to study at top universities

The Access Project students that got offers from a top university

82%

Statistically similar students outside of our programme

51%

Our programme encourages and supports students as they aim high, helping students to secure places at some of the best universities in the country. Over the past three years, 559 students from The Access Project have placed at Russell Group universities, with approximately half of those students placing at the top ten best universities according to Times Higher Education (Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial, UCL, Edinburgh, King's College London, LSE, Manchester, Bristol and Glasgow). In addition to empowering students to attend a wide range of top universities, our mentors have successfully supported applications to an astonishing range of courses. Between 2021 and 2023, our students placed successfully on 542 different types of courses, ranging from Accounting to Medicine to History, International Relations, Engineering and many more.

Beyond the headlines and statistics, it is evident that our mentoring programmes successfully support students with a myriad of interests, assisting in selecting the course and university that is best for them. In the following section, we'll hear directly from students, mentors and schools about what impactful mentoring means to them.



Laura, student at The Access Project, opening her results on A Level Results Day, August 2023

559

of our students placed at Russell Group universities between 2021-2023

254

of these students placed at universities in the Times Higher Education top ten

542

different types of courses enrolled on by our students

The Impact of Our Mentoring

Part II: Voice

Impact isn't only about our programme outcomes and delivery statistics. The views of our students, staff and schools are essential to understanding whether we are having an impact and what we can improve or develop in the future. It is a central priority to amplify and empower student voices across the organisation to improve what we do and shape what we will. This is particularly important when it comes to our mentoring. Though we take great pride in our mentoring practice, whether students themselves feel its impact is a true measure of success. As part of gathering student views, we ask directly for feedback about our mentoring practice, linking it to outcomes on our Theory of Change and providing opportunities for them to specifically comment on the tailored and individualised approach.

The Student View

Ceydanur applied to The Access Project at her school in North London when she was in Year 9. She applied to fulfil her dream of applying to a top university, attaining a high-quality degree in medicine and becoming a doctor.

When asked about the impact of the programme, Ceydanur said "My mentor has been instrumental for my university journey. She consistently checked in on me to ensure I was both personally and academically well. Her patience and kindness throughout my struggles improved my confidence when applying to a competitive course like Medicine".

Giving specific details, Ceydanur listed all of the ways in which her mentor provides expert information, advice and guidance around choosing universities, finding extra-curricular activities, writing her personal statement, preparing for medicine interviews and preparing for her exams. She said, "I have come a long way with my confidence and communication. Typically, I used to be a very timid and nervous individual, often hesitant to speak but after deciding to work in medicine, I realised I had to fix these". Her ongoing relationship with her mentor has been crucial to this journey: "I am so grateful for my mentor and all the support she has shown me over the past few years, where she has significantly contributed to the person I am now and will be". Ceydanur is now holding an offer to study Medicine at the University of Cambridge.



Students from The Access Project on a school trip to Queen Mary University of London, March 2023

The Alumni View

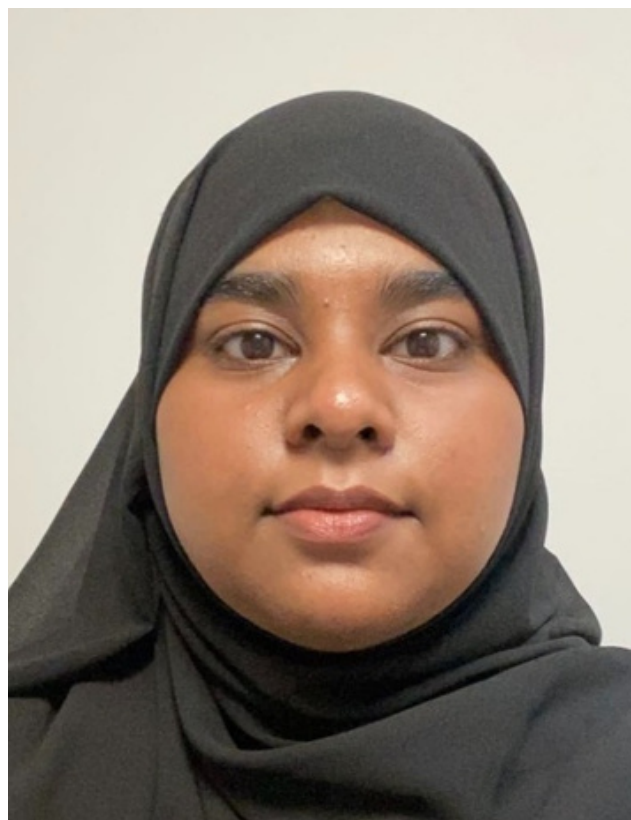
Najibah was a student on The Access Project at George Green's School, securing a place at UCL to pursue her undergraduate degree. She has recently started working at The Access Project herself, improving our group tuition experience as part of the Strategy and Impact Team. It goes without saying that the entire organisation sees Najibah's involvement (as well as the involvement of other alumni at the organisation) as a standout measure of our impact.

When asked about her experience as a mentee on The Access Project, Najibah explained that having "such a committed person pushing me towards my goals, modelling high expectations and cheering me along the way was empowering. My mentors were inspiring and dedicated, and I hope to have the same impact on students one day". Discussing the mentoring practice itself, Najibah focused on the discrete benefits and tools it provided her, expressing that it allowed her to "build cultural capital, skills and principles" that she values as well as an ability to evaluate her academic experience and create a plan to improve her approach to learning. The individualisation, structure and open dialogue that comprise the mentoring experience truly shaped Najibah's time on The Access Project, and she offered the following advice to current students to make the most out of it: "Be honest, don't be afraid to ask silly questions, show up and engage collaboratively with your mentor because they are here to help you!".

The Mentor View

When asked to sum up how they feel about mentoring, our mentors share words like empowering, transformational, supportive, rewarding, impactful, uplifting and hopeful.

Our in-school mentors at The Access Project are not only subject experts in every part of the university application process, they are deeply passionate about delivering high-quality, impactful mentoring to thousands of young people across the country. Farena, an in-school mentor working in West Yorkshire says that getting to know students is crucial for impactful mentoring, and she has found that tailoring her approach to each student gets the most out of their sessions together. Over years of practice, Farena has refined her approach, expertly steering the conversation to the needs of the student while maintaining a focus on specific outcomes. She says, "I have enjoyed supporting young people to achieve their academic goals and seeing how students open up as sessions progress. It is particularly special to me when I have supported a young person to take a step that they may have felt was unreachable".



Najibah, former student at The Access Project, now employed as Group Tuition Coordinator at The Access Project

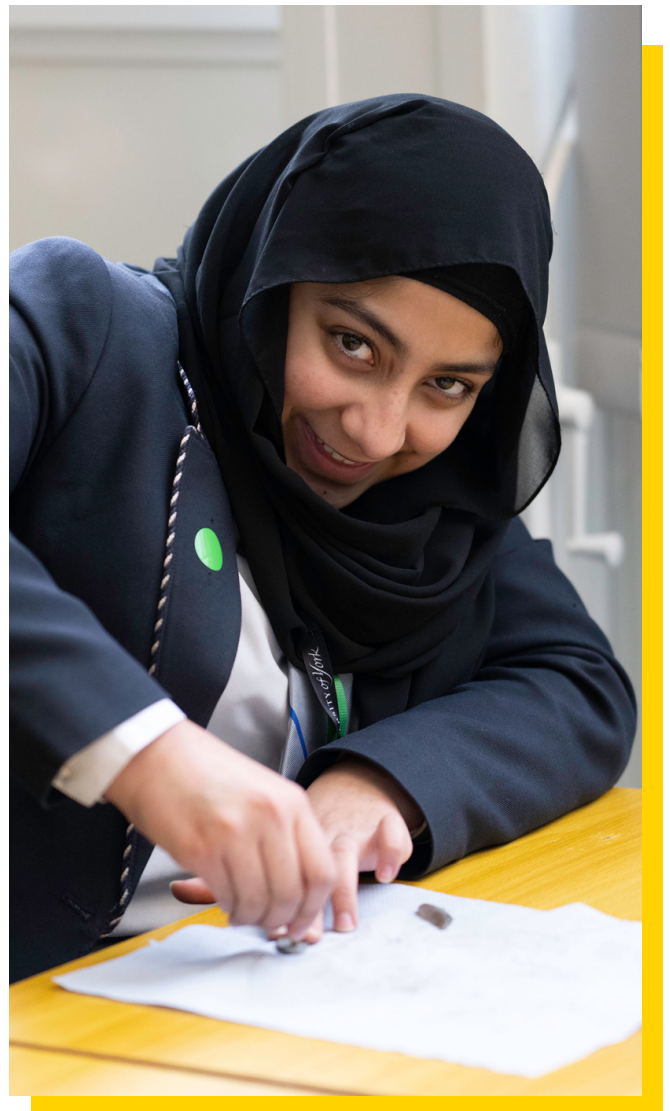


Karen Chamberlain, Headteacher at Lilian Baylis Technology School speaking at our 15th anniversary event, October 2023

The School View

The Access Project works directly with schools to understand local context, student needs and build relationships with teachers and senior leadership. This facilitates impactful mentoring and allows schools to see the direct benefits of our mentoring in practice. At our 15th anniversary event in 2023, the Head Teacher at Lilian Baylis Technology School expressed her admiration for the mentor working in school. "Having a trusted member of staff who helps our students to navigate their challenges and achieve in spite of them is what makes the difference. The Access Project shows students they are worthy of investment, that we believe in them, and that they are capable of great things".

Our engagement with schools always centres around mentoring, nurturing relationships via termly meetings with senior leadership, in-school mentors and programme managers. Their input is invaluable as we seek to develop new programmes and scale to support more young people across the country. Repeatedly, schools have shared with us that our expert mentoring is where they see the greatest impact, providing tailored support to realise student ambitions, and create a culture of success across the student community. In the final section below, we discuss our future plans and how we are levelling up mentoring to serve more young people, schools and communities.



The Access Project student on a school trip to the University of York, February 2024

The Future of Mentoring at The Access Project

Ambition is a key tenet of our work at The Access Project. In the coming years, we are aiming to scale, reach more young people across the country and continue to support their aspirations to attend a top university. Recent data has shown that the access gap is extremely persistent and while progress is being made in increasing participation from certain groups, it is unevenly distributed across the country. A recent NEON report highlighted that there is a more than 50% difference in participation in HE between certain regions for students in receipt of Free School Meals (Atherton 2024). Our growth strategy is focused on ensuring that we are serving the areas and communities where we can operate with the most impact and where the need is greatest. Having started in one school in North London, we are now operating across six regions with ambitions to expand to more. But how are we developing our mentoring practice as we reach more students?

Key recent developments in mentoring practice at The Access Project include a dedicated focus on inclusive and adaptable mentoring. As student needs change, our practice must adapt. Therefore, in collaboration with diversity and inclusion experts, we have developed training for all mentors on Anti-Racist and Culturally Responsive mentoring as well as dedicated training to support students with particular Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.



Student at The Access Project on a school trip to Queen Mary University of London, March 2023



Ras.I, former student at The Access Project, now studying at the University of Oxford, speaking at our 15th anniversary celebration, October 2023

This provides our mentors, schools and the young people on our programmes with confidence that our mentoring can support a wide range of student situations. It also allows us to evaluate our own practices and continuously improve quality, holding ourselves accountable to regularly updating our approach.

In addition to inclusivity, we have also been developing a more specific focus on mentoring in relation to skills. Developing essential, transferable skills is linked to positive academic and employment outcomes as well as improved social and emotional learning (EEF 2021; Gedikoglu 2021; Hoole 2023). However, there are multiple barriers to equality of opportunity in developing these soft skills, which disadvantages certain groups of students. As the University of Bath and Social Mobility Commission state in their 2019 report, "There is evidence of an association between soft skills and intergenerational social mobility [...] Our research found a correlation between higher levels of some soft skills and upward social mobility" (Donnelly et al. 2019). However, just as there is an access gap in progression to higher education, there is an access gap in opportunities to develop transferable skills.

Therefore, we are piloting a new programme co-designed with students, universities, alumni, volunteers, schools and corporate partners that creatively supports students' development of communication, organisation, problem-solving/critical thinking and collaboration skills. Our corporate volunteers will provide expert insight into the world of work and the applicability of these skills within it, increasing students' cultural capital and expanding their professional network. Our ambition is that students will build their essential skills alongside their university readiness, setting them up for even greater success at university and beyond.

Conclusion

This report has explored impactful mentoring at The Access Project. It has outlined the evidence base for mentoring as an effective intervention to reduce risks to equality of opportunity, explored our mentoring model and its impact. We heard from students, alumni, staff and schools about the impact of mentoring and looked ahead to the future of mentoring as the organisation scales and adapts. It is evident that students from under-resourced backgrounds continue to face innumerable challenges in their pursuit of their ambitions to improve their attainment, attend the best universities and build skills to accelerate their future success. However, our mentors are on the frontlines, working directly with young people to overcome those barriers and lead the way for improved access to higher education. This report has served as evidence for the power of high quality mentoring and the impact that it can have on the lives of young people across the country.

If you want to get in touch with us at the Access Project about anything at all, please visit our website or contact us via the channels below.

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-  info@theaccessproject.org.uk

The Access Project
First Floor, Canopi-Borough
7-14 Great Dover Street London
SE1 4YR



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