

Building Motivation, Achievement and Progression Online: Evaluating Brightside's Approach to Online Mentoring



Executive Summary

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International Centre for Guidance Studies

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Related research papers

This research is one of a series of publications by iCeGS. Recent examples include:

Hooley, T. (2012). How the internet changed career: framing the relationship between career development and online technologies. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling (NICEC)*, 29: 3-12.

Hooley, T., Mellors-Bourne, R. and Sutton, M. (2013). *Early Evaluation of Unistats: User Experiences*. Bristol: HEFCE.

Longridge, D., Hooley, T. & Staunton, T. (2013). *Building Online Employability: A Guide for Academic Departments*. Derby: International Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby.

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Executive summary

This report sets out the findings of an independent evaluation of Brightside conducted by the International Centre for Guidance Studies. Brightside is a charity that seeks to raise young people's aspirations and awareness about education and career pathways and enhance their capability to achieve those aspirations. Brightside supports young people through a mixture of information provision and online mentoring. The organisation has existed for over a decade and has proved its relevance across a number of different policy environments. However, the current report represents the first systematic evaluation of its effectiveness.

A mixed methods approach to evaluation was taken which combined interviews with Brightside staff and partners (representatives of organisations that used Brightside) with analysis of existing web statistics collected by Brightside, an online survey of mentees (n=555) and a detailed content analysis of a sample of online mentoring conversations (n=366). Both the survey and the content analysis were undertaken with mentees who had sent at least two messages as part of their online mentoring experience. A literature review was also conducted which demonstrated that Brightside's approach was innovative, but in tune with other online mentoring practice.

Overall the evaluation found that Brightside is well regarded by its partners, and provides a tool which delivers high quality mentoring and clear impacts for participants (mentees).

- 91% said that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the experience of online mentoring;
- 56% said that the online mentoring experience had helped them to make decisions; and
- 49% said that the online mentoring had helped them to do things differently.

It is particularly effective in helping young people to transition to higher education by helping them to think about which university they want to apply to, and supporting them through the application process.

Engaging and sustaining participation in online mentoring

The evaluation looked at how partners, mentors and mentees are engaged in Brightside mentoring. It found that Brightside is a well-known and popular tool with its partners who report that the site is easy to use and that there is good support available from Brightside's central team. Partners felt that they were able to recruit appropriate mentors for their projects. Although they felt that the support available from Brightside for mentors was good, their feedback suggests that it could be developed further.

Brightside is highly successful in engaging mentees. However, less than half of those initially engaged successfully establish a mentoring relationship. Many of those who do not engage in mentoring may nevertheless benefit from Brightside's information resources, but there is room to explore how the journey from initial engagement to full mentoring relationship can be improved.

Models of delivery

The evaluation found that there were four main ways in which Brightside was used by its partners.

1. As a repository of reliable online information, with little or no use of the mentoring functionality.
2. As a communication tool to support face-to-face projects, again with little or no mentoring actually taking place.
3. As an e-mentoring system in which mentoring takes place entirely online.
4. As a b-mentoring system in which mentoring is delivered through a mix of online and onsite activity.

All four uses were found to have some benefits, but e-mentoring and b-mentoring form the focus of this evaluation.

Quality of provision

The evaluation team developed ten identifiers of quality which were used to evaluate the quality of mentoring delivered through Brightside. These were as follows.

The mentor would:

1. establish an appropriate relationship with the mentee;
2. establish the purpose of the mentoring conversation;
3. provide the mentee with information and/or links to useful resources;
4. refer the mentee to appropriate services;
5. provide prompt and relevant responses;
6. encourage the mentee to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses;
7. encourage the mentee to explore their career goals;
8. identify opportunities and explore ways to overcome barriers;
9. move the mentee progressively towards their goals; and
10. bring the process to a mutually satisfactory close.

In general the quality of mentoring was high with quality identifiers observable in 84% of the conversations reviewed. However, there were a number of areas in which quality might be improved particularly in relation to the structuring of mentoring relationships and the provision of information and referral. It was suggested that existing quality standards such as the matrix standard, and the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation's APS (Approved Provider Standard) would provide a good starting point.

The content of online mentoring conversations

The mentoring conversations covered a wide range of topics including personal and social issues, health issues, work, employment and employability skills, school and college, higher education and further education and work-related learning. The most common areas discussed focused on the process of choosing to go to higher education and to a lesser

extent the subsequent transition into work. Mentoring conversations were less likely to address personal issues or to explore alternatives to higher education.

Measuring impact

The evaluation found that the overwhelming majority of survey respondents (mentees) were satisfied with their experience of Brightside and would recommend it to a friend. Mentees were able to report a range of benefits from participating in online mentoring including helping them to make decisions and changing their behaviour. Mentees also reported an increase in a range of skills and knowledge during the period that they were undertaking online mentoring. In particular they felt that they understood more about their careers options and were more able to actively manage their careers.

Conclusions

This evaluation has found that Brightside is well regarded by its partners, and provides a tool which delivers high quality mentoring and clear impacts for participants. In particular Brightside provides its partners with a tool which they can embed in a range of different ways to support young people to think about their futures. It is particularly effective in helping young people to transition to higher education by encouraging them to think about which university they want to apply to, and supporting them through the application process.

Of course there are areas for improvement, but these should not diminish the value that has been identified in online mentoring. The evaluation suggests that there are three key areas for improvement.

- Firstly, users have suggested that there could be ways to make accessing messages more user-friendly, and there are likely to be areas of the website that could be better used and better integrated into the mentoring conversations.
- Secondly, Brightside mentoring is used as a platform in a number of different ways by partners, which is a reflection of its versatility. If these different approaches were better understood, conceptualised and then developed as a range of complementary products then again Brightside could make technical improvements to the website and further improve its offer of support to partners.
- Thirdly, the focus of Brightside activity is on access to higher education – its reach could be extended by applying its approach to other groups of young people who are interested in transitions to a wider range of opportunities, or to particular groups of adults.

Much has been made in the policy discourse about the importance of face-to-face advice and guidance to support the educational and career choices of young people. This evaluation suggests that perhaps it is not the format of communication (online or face-to-face) that makes the difference, but rather whether a real relationship with another human being forms a core part of the support offered. Brightside mentoring places human relationships at the heart of the provision of career and transition support for young people.

Online mentoring of this kind clearly has a role to play in helping young people to make informed, considered and supported choices about their futures.