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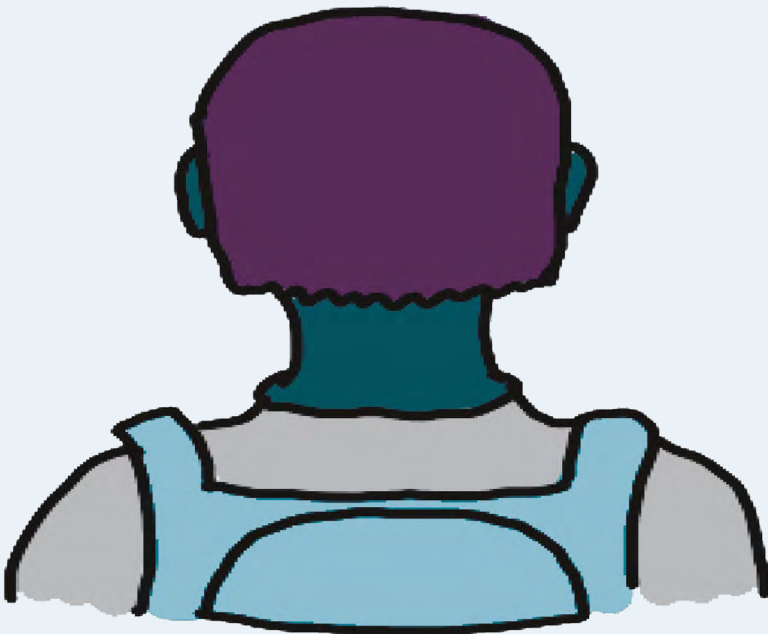
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A review of practice in the West-North-West Cluster of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

Mentoring for Access, Retention and Student Success:

A review of practice in the West-North-West
Cluster of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)



Summary Report

February 2024

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This research report is linked to Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) 3. PATH 3 is funded by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and supported by the Higher Education Authority.

Any citation of this report should use the following reference:

Brady, B., Duffy, L., Flynn, P., Crosse, R., Keenaghan, C., Morrissey, S. (2024) Mentoring for Access, Retention and Student Success: A review of practice in the West-North West Cluster of Higher Education Institutions: Summary Report. Galway: University of Galway & ATU.

ISBN: 978-1-911702-12-2.

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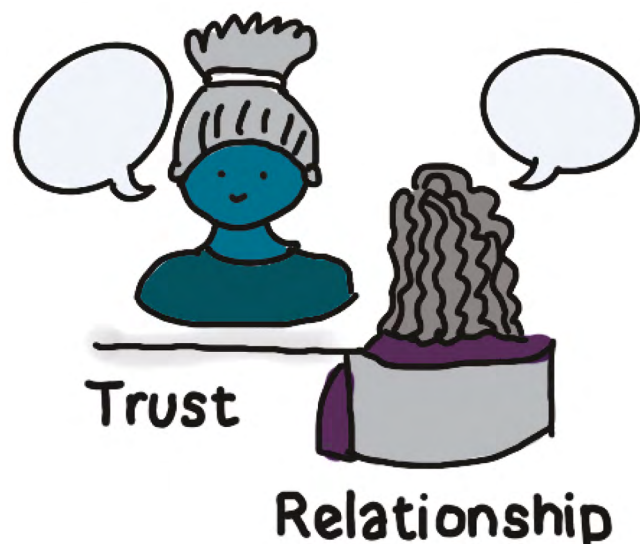


Introduction

Universal access to education means that all people have a right to participate in education regardless of their personal circumstances. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 states that by 2030 we must “ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university” (UNESCO, 2015). Equity of access to higher education is central to Irish education policy which is evident in the fourth *National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028*. The plan does not focus on access alone but also includes participation and student success, guided by two overarching aspirations (2022, p. 28):

1. That the higher education student body entering, participating in, and completing higher education, at all levels and across all programmes, reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland’s population.
2. That our higher education institutions (HEIs) are inclusive, universally designed environments which support and foster student success and outcomes, equity, and diversity, and are responsive to the needs of students and wider communities.

PATH 3 of the Access Plan provides funding for “regional clusters of HEIs to develop partnerships with the FE sector and other community partners to support students from underrepresented groups” (HEA, 2022, p. 46). The West-North-West cluster is a partnership between higher education institutions (ATU Galway/Mayo (lead), ATU Donegal, ATU Sligo and the University of Galway) established to support underrepresented socioeconomic groups and communities. The focus of this work encompasses pre-entry supports for groups identified in the National Access Plan, with the aim of breaking down barriers to higher education, while also providing post-entry supports for students to help them to progress in their course of study. A significant part of the work delivered through PATH 3 has been to develop mentoring programmes.



What is mentoring?

Mentoring has a long history and can be found in ancient cultures and folklore, including the Greek mythological story, The Odyssey, which has the first reference to the term 'Mentor' (meaning wise one). In a more contemporary definition, mentors are described as 'caring individuals, who ... provide people with support, counsel, friendship, reinforcement, and a constructive example' (Mentor 2005, p.9). In mentoring relationships, a mentor has greater experience than the mentee. Relationships are voluntary in that both parties choose to become involved and there is some degree of an emotional bond and a sense of trust between the mentor and mentee (Dubois and Karcher, 2005). The mentor and mentee can be peers, or the mentor can be an older more experienced adult mentoring a younger person. Mentoring relationships can be 'natural' or 'formal.' A 'natural' or informal mentoring bond is described as a relationship that develops spontaneously within the mentees social network (for example, with a neighbour, teacher, or colleague) (Baker and Maguire, 2005). Formal mentoring relationships are organised through a mentoring programme and refer to a one-to-one relationship or 'match' between a mentor and mentee. Group based mentoring involves a mentor forming a relationship with a group of people for a particular purpose.

In this study, mentoring in a higher education context is defined as any process that facilitates someone with lived experience to provide guidance, support and knowledge in a way that allows another person (the mentee) to thrive over time in the mentoring relationship. Mentoring for access, retention and student success refers to activities designed to support students in accessing, participating, and progressing in their journey to and through higher education.

Aims and methodology of the study:

This study was undertaken to build a profile of the current PATH 3 funded mentoring initiatives focused on access, progression, and retention currently in place in ATU and University of Galway and to reflect on issues arising for the future development and evaluation of mentoring initiatives.

A literature review was conducted on evidence relating to higher education mentoring initiatives focused on access, progression, and retention. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 23 stakeholders, including university staff, community representatives, mentors, and mentees to understand the aims, operating model and perceived strengths and challenges of the programmes from their perspectives. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Galway Research Ethics Committee.

Findings:

There are currently three key areas or contexts in which mentoring is deployed as part of a strategy to promote access, progression, and retention. These are now reviewed in turn, drawing on the literature and primary research findings from this study. We then move on to identify thematic issues related to implementation that emerged as important across all the models.

1. School-based mentoring

Key findings from literature:

It has been found that interventions to help students make equitable decisions about going to college should be implemented at ages 11-15 as it is during this time that students begin to think about going to college and when grades tend to fall for socioeconomically disadvantaged students (Wimberly & Noeth, 2005; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Swail & Perna, 2002). Second level mentoring interventions tend to focus on raising awareness and creating pathways to higher education for underrepresented groups, such as first generation college going students. For example, interventions include learning

how to build social capital by developing the skill of recruiting mentors or by supporting them to develop a positive attitude towards college (Carrell & Sacredote, 2013; Glass, 2023; Clemens, 2016; Schwartz S. Kanchewa, Cutler, & Cunningham, 2016; Woods & Preciado, 2016). Building a sustainable, trusting relationship is a key factor in helping students develop a positive attitude towards higher education and in fostering their self-belief in being accepted to college (Woods & Precario, 2016).

Key findings from the current study:

The PATH 3 funded school based mentoring programmes implemented in the WNW cluster are as follows:

Programme and location	Setting, Approach and Key Focus
<p>Strive Mentoring (ATU Letterkenny) is a mentoring programme for DEIS post-primary schools in the North-West. Senior students mentor 1st year students in their school and students visit campus to experience a higher education environment.</p>	<p>Setting: Second-level schools Approach: Peer mentoring and on-campus event Focus: Removing barriers to access higher education</p>
<p>Uni4U (University of Galway) is an on-campus mentoring programme at the University of Galway for 6th class students from DEIS schools. Each participating school is given a day to go to campus to experience university life. The primary school students are allocated mentors drawn from higher education with whom they engage in activities such as storytelling, goal setting, campus tours and social media guidance.</p>	<p>Setting: Primary schools Approach: Peer mentoring and on-campus event Focus: Removing barriers to access higher education</p>

The school-based models implemented in the West / North West Cluster are seen to raise awareness among children and young people that people have different pathways to and through education; in the words of one mentor, it *'makes them realise that you don't have to have high points, or a certain background, that anyone can go to college'* (Mentor, Uni4U). The programme mentors are generally students who come from similar backgrounds or have experienced challenges in their educational pathway. This helps children to view them as role models that they can identify with.

*'a lot of our students ...come from communities where students are under-represented, let's say, and they are probably the best spokespeople for why you should come to university. So, the idea was that ..they would go back into their community. And ..you know, link in with students, prospective students, and to speak about how life changing experience was going to university and to break down those barriers'.
(HEI staff member)*

Visiting campuses and meeting staff and students can be *'an eye opener'* for children, making college feel *'less alien'* and more accessible to them. Offering taster options helps mentors to see what interests children. From this they can connect with their mentee and raise awareness of different options open to them.

Group mentoring models are viewed as more feasible than one-to-one mentoring in a school context. Schools find that peer mentoring models help incoming first year students to settle in school and help to create a culture of support in the school. Mentors value being able to share their own experiences and being able to *'sow the seed'* to encourage a child to think about pursuing a career of interest to them.



2. Community based mentoring

Key findings from literature:

Community based mentoring programmes are located in communities with low rates of educational progression; they support and encourage young people and adults from underrepresented groups to consider accessing a further or higher education course. Community mentors are there to share information and provide motivational support and can be described as ‘a valuable community

resource, who can help to share information and advice about their college experience, to help prospective students build their awareness of college courses, how to apply, and the benefits of a college education” (<https://collegeaware.ie/community-mentors/>). Research has found that collaboration is central to the effectiveness of community-based mentoring (Community Mentoring, n.d.).

Key findings from the current study:

The PATH 3 funded community mentoring programmes implemented in the WNW cluster are as follows:

Programme and location	Setting, Approach and Key Focus
<p>Cranmore Education Mentoring Programme (Cranmore and ATU Sligo) is a joint initiative between the Cranmore Regeneration Office, Sligo Co. Council and ATU, Sligo which aims to support young people and adults’ access to higher education.</p>	<p>Setting: Community Approach: One to One and Group Key Focus: Removing barriers to access higher education</p>
<p>Ballybane Education Mentoring, (Ballybane Community and ATU Galway Mayo) an initiative of ATU, Galway, is a newer initiative, which provides a wraparound service to support individuals who wish to progress in education or career.</p>	<p>Setting: Community Approach: One to One Key Focus: Removing barriers to access higher education</p>

Community mentoring was found to reach a different profile of people to school-based mentoring – For example. mature students, refugees, young people in care – but also works with some young people in schools. The mentor helps to raise awareness of educational supports and opportunities among and in the community and encourages people to engage with education and training, from non-accredited to accredited. This model can support people who wish to progress in education but who may not have people who may not have people with experience of higher education in their networks. The aim is also to help make systems work for the benefit of people who experience barriers to access and who otherwise may be deterred by bureaucracy or lack of information. One community mentor described her role as follows:

‘You are the person there that is going to help alleviate barriers that they are facing, no matter what it is. it is like how can we alleviate those barriers? It’s that wrap around support for them.’ (Community mentor)

Mentors highlighted the benefits of being able to liaise with other organisations to mobilise support for local people experiencing barriers to progression. She stated that *‘there are so many organisations now that we’ve built up a relationship with that it has made it easier to provide that support and even if I can’t provide that support, I know who to ask or where to go.’*

One mentee interviewed said that his community mentor had encouraged him to consider getting back to education and helped him to apply for his course. He can meet with her for support when he feels he needs it. Mentees valued that the community model

provides a continuity of support – people can *‘dip in and out’* as needed – as one mentee said, *‘it’s not a service that has an expiration date on it.’* Another mentee described the benefits of community mentoring as *‘having someone dedicated to helping you progress’* and *‘getting more attention and help’*.

One mentee described her experience of mentoring as *‘life changing.’* She described herself as *‘totally stuck’* because of challenging life experiences but having a locally accessible and supportive education mentor in the community encouraged and supported her to return to education. This interviewee felt strongly that community-based mentoring is an asset for young people and mature students as many are unsure of where to go for support. She says that it *‘changes your thinking about your life choices.’* She herself is currently in the process of training to become a mentor.

‘I felt paralysed before mentoring. I now realise there are no wrong decisions- just to keep stepping forward.’ (Community mentee)

In Cranmore, the community mentoring model works with and builds capacity of natural mentors in the community through a QQI Level 5 certificate. Several mentors interviewed who had done this training said that this training built their mentoring skills and awareness of the importance of mentoring in all aspects of life. They have seen the benefits of empowering individuals and families in the community through mentoring. This training programme helps to overcome the challenges associated with the recruitment of community mentors, thereby building the sustainability of mentoring capacity in the community.

3. Higher Education Institution (HEI) mentoring

Key findings from literature:

Statistics show that students are at a high risk of dropping out of higher education within the first year, particularly students from underrepresented groups (HEA, 2023). Mentoring in higher education focuses on providing students with practical and emotional support to help them to progress and thrive in university. Mentoring has been proven to help students from underrepresented groups overcome the feeling of stigma that they often feel before accessing college, particularly if they are first generation students. It can provide a sense of belonging

and allow students to feel accepted in their new learning environment (Walton & Cohen, 2007; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003; O’Sullivan, Mulligan, Kuster, Smith, & Hannon, 2017; Hagler, Christensen & Rhodes, 2024). In addition to staff-student mentoring, peer mentoring has been proven to be an effective form of mentoring at higher education, for example, peer mentors have the capacity to prevent the emergence of academic, social or health struggles by enabling student support (Davidson, Bellamy, Guy, & Miller, 2012; Ramchand, et al., 2017).

Key findings from the current study:

The PATH 3 funded HEI based mentoring programmes implemented in the WNW cluster are as follows:

Programme and location	Setting, Approach and Key Focus
<p>ATS mentoring (University of Galway) is a peer mentoring programme for first year students. The programme has had various iterations over the years and at present the target population is students who access higher education through the Access Programme.</p>	<p>Setting: HEI Approach: One to One and Group Key Focus: Encouraging progression and retention</p>
<p>Foroige’s Third Level mentoring programme (ATU and the University of Galway) takes a formal approach to support underrepresented students. Mentors are recruited from across all departments in the university and are matched with a mentee.</p>	<p>Setting: HEI Approach: One to One Key Focus: Encouraging progression and retention</p>
<p>FE2HE (University of Galway) aims to remove the barriers to progression from further education to higher education, particularly in areas of science and engineering where the number of progressions into higher education were historically quite low.</p>	<p>Setting: HEI Approach: One to One and Group Key Focus: Encouraging progression and retention</p>

In this study, HEI mentoring initiatives were seen to meet a need for emotional and practical support among students. Mentoring programmes were viewed as being particularly beneficial for first generation students during the transition to higher education as they do not have access to support from family members who have lived experience of going to university and what that involves from a social, emotional, academic, and practical perspective. Students are provided with a ‘friendly face’ in university – which helps to ensure that they do not ‘fall through the cracks’.

“If you have a consistent staff member checking in with you once a month, or however long it is, I think that, like hopefully, your mentee will be able to tell you that they might be experiencing difficulties, and you’d be able to kind of guide and navigate them, maybe towards certain supports that they might need” (HEI mentor)

Mentees taking part in this study described how mentoring helped to build their confidence and sense of security in college. One mentee described her experience of mentoring following her transfer to the second year of her course from another city. She applied for mentoring to help her to get to know the college. Her mentor, who was a graduate from her course, brought her on a campus tour and showed her where all her lectures and tutorials would take place.

“We clicked straight away – as soon as we met it was like I was just talking to a friend. There was no awkwardness. From the beginning I knew I could ask whatever I liked and that she was there to help ... She pointed me in the right direction, how the college works, she helped me get to know other people in my class. Very practical, helpful support”. (HEI mentee)

Another mentee described how she found it difficult at the start to adapt to college life as there is no one there to check in on you and ‘you are responsible for everything.’

She continued by saying that she did not know what she was doing or how to do things when she started college, but her mentor is ‘*amazing ... she is very helpful. It doesn’t feel like you are forced into it.*’ One mentor commented that active listening is a key part of the mentor’s role – that ‘*sometimes people just want to be heard.*’ One mentee feels mentoring is good for people who have just turned 18 and who do not have family or people to support them: ‘*They may not know what is happening. It would be good for them to have someone there to help them through that.*’

Higher education mentoring was also viewed as building social capital among students, particularly for students who may not have the bridging connections that can help them to progress in higher education. Importantly, it can help them to develop the skill of help seeking and come to realise that it is ok to ask for help if they need it. One mentee said she finds it hard to ask for help but when she does ‘*it makes a difference – it makes it easier.*’

In addition to the benefits relating to student retention, benefits for mentors and universities were also highlighted. Higher education mentoring models were seen to harness the support and goodwill of university staff and students for the benefit of new students. Mentors taking part in the research described it as a positive and enriching experience. Some mentoring relationships have developed into long-term friendships. Acting as a mentor can give staff an insight into the needs of students, meaning that they empathise more with them. One stakeholder said she feels mentoring is a good way for staff/lecturers to see what is going on in college, the supports that are available and that not all students come from the same kind of background with the same level of family support. ‘*It gives lecturers a different perspective to who they are teaching. It’s a nice a way for staff and students to meet on a one-to-one level.*’

Management and Operations

A number of key themes emerged regarding management and operations of mentoring programmes in this context, which are now discussed.

Targeting and take-up of programmes

Across all mentoring models, there was a common challenge in relation to the targeting and take-up of programmes. Second-level programmes are generally not available outside of DEIS schools (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools), meaning that they may not reach under-represented groups who are not attending DEIS schools. In the case of community mentoring, stakeholders reported that it can take time for people to understand what ‘mentoring’ means and the role of a community mentor. Getting people to engage with community mentoring can be difficult because many people may have had negative experiences of education or do not see it as relevant to them.

A range of issues were identified relating to the targeting of HEI mentoring. Stakeholders felt that there is confusion about the different mentoring models in operation in the universities, who they are for, and which option is best for different purposes. Some students may be offered several mentors, while others may have none. Students who are targeted by mentoring programmes can be reluctant to engage and may feel stigmatised by being singled out as ‘needing’ a mentor. On the other hand, some feel that there is not enough awareness among students about the availability of mentoring and how it might be beneficial to them. Programmes can experience challenges in sustaining energy and interest, with the result that there can be variability in demand from year to year.

Partnerships with schools and community and voluntary organisations

In school and community mentoring models in particular, the importance of partnerships with communities and schools emerged as an important aspect of practice. For example, the Cranmore model works through a community development approach, thus ensuring it is appropriate to the local context. This model of partnership between community organisations and higher education institutions is viewed as valuable as it can facilitate a two-way flow of information and support.

Second-level schools found it very beneficial to receive university training and support to establish a peer mentoring programme and provide on-campus days for mentors. One teacher described how having this external university support provides them with new energy and ideas:

“Guides you, and it supports you along the way, and then you always have a link to bounce back, and then there’s a lot of professional sharing professional conversations that take place. What is happening in other schools? So, you see what is going on there. And, how, do they make things work?” (Second-level teacher)

Most of the HEI based mentoring models are run by the university themselves, except for Foróige’s Third Level mentoring Programme. Partnering with an organisation that specialises in mentoring draws on its specific expertise in recruitment, matching, training, and support, thus helping to ensure alignment to best practice. Flexibility is required in terms of implementation of partnership models to ensure a correct fit with each specific context.

Building and sustaining mentoring relationships

Many mentors and stakeholders stated that it takes time to build a trusting mentoring relationship. In particular, community mentoring relationships were described as a ‘slow burn,’ taking time to become established. Across all mentoring models, mentors and mentees noted that their relationship development was made easier by having things in common, such as their background, interests, and study commitments. For example, one HEI mentor described how she ‘clicked’ with her mentee straight away:

‘We’re more like friends to be honest because I’m young, she’s young. It’s very easy – we have the same interests. There was no awkwardness ever.’ (HEI mentor)

Having structured training, co-ordination and support available for mentors and mentees is viewed as essential to the successful delivery of mentoring programmes. Clear guidelines for mentors regarding their role and the programme structure is essential. To avoid difficulties arising, there is a need for clear agreement and expectations among all parties about the boundaries of the mentoring role.

Some mentees taking part in the research felt strongly that encouraging and facilitating students to ‘give back’ and share their lived experience could help to ensure the sustainability of mentoring programmes. For example, mentees who were mentored in first or second year of higher education could go on to be involved in a peer mentoring programme when they reach their final year or as alumni. A number of mentees stated that they would consider becoming a mentor in the future:

‘To help someone like the way I have been helped would be amazing’ (HEI mentee)

General awareness of the meaning and importance of mentoring

A theme that emerged in this study was the confusion and lack of clarity regarding what is meant by ‘mentoring.’ There are many different mentoring models, with varying degrees of relational closeness, contact and other criteria. As highlighted earlier, some students felt there was a stigma associated with being offered a mentor, which indicates that it may be considered from a deficit perspective. However, stakeholders felt strongly that everybody in society would benefit from having mentors in different contexts and that it would be valuable to have more education and awareness of the purpose and value of mentoring. This would help to ensure take up of mentoring opportunities among people who need them and avoid any perceptions of stigma.

It was suggested that it would be valuable to focus on the skills of building social capital and help seeking in second and higher education. This reflects a growing awareness in the research literature of the importance of teaching young people how to recognise and recruit mentors from within their own networks (e.g. lecturer, tutor, older student). Some stakeholders felt that a solid foundation in these skills would ensure that students are more confident in their ability to ask for help and more open to receiving help. Choosing a mentor themselves means that it is someone that the young person likes and respects, thus increasing the chances of a meaningful bond developing (Spencer, Tugenberg, Ocean, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2016). Using technology to enhance the mentoring experience has also been found to have benefits (Werntz et al, 2023).

Evaluation, impact, and evidence-based practice

Across all mentoring models, stakeholders noted that little formal evaluation has been conducted, which makes it difficult to assess the outcomes and impact of this work. Most programmes conduct in-house operational reviews and receive anecdotal feedback from teachers, mentors, or mentees but there is currently no system in place to evaluate outcomes from these programmes – for example, tracking whether students from second-level programmes go on to higher education or whether mentoring in HEI’s improves progression and retention. It is acknowledged that such evaluation is complex and challenging, particularly in the context of GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) constraints. For example, students may not make a linear progression from further to higher education so proving impact can be difficult. In the case of community mentoring, it is acknowledged that impact will take time and can be difficult to prove because the objectives are to promote engagement in education, not specifically just access to higher education. Because programmes have been reliant on short-term funding to date, it has not been feasible to develop longer-term evaluation models. Stakeholders also noted that adopting evidence-based practice is also made difficult by the dearth of evidence available regarding what constitutes an effective mentoring programme for retention and progression outcomes.

Sustainability of mentoring programmes

The funding provided for mentoring to date has been beneficial in that it facilitated the piloting of innovative new models and allowed for learning regarding what works best in particular contexts. Stakeholders expressed concern that promising initiatives that have taken time to develop and embed will end as the current funding cycle concludes. There is an appetite among stakeholders to build on the learning to date and to adopt a strategic approach to the development of mentoring for access, retention, and progression in the region. Such a strategy could include a set of key principles to guide mentoring practice, such as those proposed below.



Guidance



Support



Mentoring

Conclusion

Mentoring is viewed by stakeholders as a very valuable element of the overall package of measures targeted at access, progression, and retention of under-represented students. As we have seen throughout this reports, PATH 3 funded mentoring initiatives are being provided in a range of contexts, including in schools, community settings and in higher education institutions. At second level, mentors play an important role in raising awareness among students that replace college with higher education is a potential option for them. Having mentors from their own community and backgrounds who have progressed and thrived in replace college with higher education helps to break down psychological barriers to progression. Mentoring provided in community settings is seen to reach students who may not come through traditional routes and provide the personalised wraparound support they need to pursue the educational paths of their choice. In higher education settings, mentoring is seen to provide practical and emotional support for students that increases their confidence and well-being in the university environment and thereby increase their chances of progressing and succeeding.

However, the evidence base regarding the models developed in the WNW cluster is currently limited. This is an area that needs to be strengthened in the future as part of a long-term strategic approach.

Mentoring for access, retention and progression in higher education operates within a complex system. In complex systems, each situation is unique and adherence to a set of guiding principles can help to ensure a shared understanding and approach (Preskill & Gopal, 2014). A principles-based approach to developing quality mentoring systems is viewed as an effective way to provide guidance, rather than a prescriptive approach for equitable and effective programming.

The following principles are based on the evidence from the literature, stakeholder perspectives and the values of participating universities and are proposed as the basis for future strategic development of mentoring for access, retention and student success in the West-North West Cluster of HEIs.



- 1. Mentoring is everybody's business:** Opportunities are provided throughout the student experience to ensure they are supported to access, enjoy, and succeed in their education by having access to mentors and by having the opportunity to be mentors to others.
- 2. Evidence-informed:** Mentoring activity will be underpinned by appropriate evidence relating to the approach used. Qualitative and quantitative evidence will be gathered and shared. Quality mentoring tools and resources will be developed and shared to support training and implementation of evidence-based practice.
- 3. Mentee-led:** To have meaningful mentoring experiences, mentees will be provided with relevant information on how to access mentors through natural and formal programmes. They will be supported to find mentors and initiate mentoring relationships.
- 4. Innovative practice:** Innovations are necessary to respond to evolving needs and contexts. Possible areas of innovation include strengthening and expanding mentees social connections and exploration of the use of technology in the mentoring process.
- 5. Mentor-rich environments:** Schools, communities and campuses are spaces where mentoring is promoted to cultivate a culture of mentoring. The needs and contexts of first-generation students will be considered in the design and delivery of any mentoring activity.
- 6. Understanding context:** Mentoring programmes will be responsive to the racial and cultural perspectives of participants. Mentors must be cognisant of the context that mentees exist in and value mentee narrative, thus leveraging the mentoring relationship to support the mentee navigate the myriad of issues they may face (Weiston-Serdan, T., & Sánchez, B., 2017).
- 7. Ethical practice:** Within the context of the mentoring relationship, ethical practices will be observed to ensure relationships are based on safety, trust, integrity, dignity and the rights of the mentors and mentees.
- 8. Equity:** Particular effort will be made to ensure first-generation students have mentoring support pre- and post-entry.
- 9. Sustainability:** For mentoring to be effective, meaningful, and sustainable, it needs to be understood as a process that requires ongoing commitment in terms of time and resources.
- 10. Collective impact:** Mentoring does not happen in a vacuum. While mentoring is intended to improve access, retention and student success at an individual level, collaboration with partners in other sectors is key to meaningful social change needed for widening participation in higher education.



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