Intergenerational mentoring and widening participation in Higher Education

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What's the issue?

Analysis of data on school leavers in Scotland shows considerable inequality in access to university higher education. This is particularly acute for young people who are first in their generation to consider university. These students include those experiencing ongoing socio-economic disadvantage as well as those who are from working class families. Nowhere is this inequality more apparent than when looking at access to highly competitive courses such as medicine, veterinary medicine, dentistry and law. The result is that in some communities in Scotland very few young people, if any, will progress into these and other higher professions. In fact in sum, Scotland now lags behind the rest of the UK in terms of social mobility and access to higher education. Alan Milburn, the former Chair of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission has warned that 'there is a risk that Scotland will sleepwalk into a social mobility crisis unless urgent action is taken" (November, 2015).

There is now a need to develop innovative research-informed practice in the area of widening participation. Intergenerational mentoring offers a research-informed response that can make an important contribution to this policy agenda.

Scale of the problem

◊ 86% of Scottish medical students have parents from the highest-ranked professions, the highest proportion of all four UK nations. Steven et al, (2016)

◊ Fewer than one in seven students (13%) at the four ancient universities in Scotland are from working-class backgrounds and only 3% have parents in routine occupations.

◊ Senior judges in Scotland are eight times more likely to have attended an independent (i.e. 'private') school than the population as a whole. SMCP, (2015)

Understanding the problem

Current interventions in Scotland have not been informed by research and have - as in the rest of the UK - maintained an enduring focus on 'poverty of aspiration' held by young people and their families (Perry & Francis, 2010). New research challenges this way of thinking and encourages a more detailed understanding of the institutional processes that act as barriers and help sustain inequality (Wilson et al, 2014). Ball (2010) and Gorard (2007) argue for the importance of broader out-of-school factors in explaining educational attainment. Wikeley et al (2007) argue that positive out-of-school educational experiences are crucial to young people and equip them with the interpersonal skills and understanding necessary for effective working relationships with their teachers. Archer et al., (2010) have furthered this position in the area of higher education, by proposing that education policy should become focused on 'levelling the playing field' by providing a greater emphasis on supporting young people in realising their ambition through access to more extensive information and advice.

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This presents a significant challenge to current education policy in Scotland. High attaining young people in some of Scotland's communities have a limited understanding of the professions; they lack access to social networks that can facilitate career understanding; are impeded in obtaining suitable work experience; and they have limited knowledge of higher education and its various application processes. These deficits frustrate their progress towards the most competitive courses and elite professions. In addition they face financial constraints in resourcing activities such as visits to universities, different employment settings or varied work experience which may improve these deficits. They are also unlikely to be able to access personal tutoring – either during their school career or in the successful transition to higher education (Wilson et al., 2014).

In parallel, research on social class in the UK (Savage, 2014) shows that individuals establish connections largely within their own social class. Consequently young people from working class backgrounds will have limited opportunity to access the professional networks available to more middle/upper middle class young people. And these networks are the ones that can support successful entry and progress in higher education as well as subsequent entrance to the professions.

What we know about mentoring

- **Mentoring is a complex intervention**. Programmes are structured and delivered in a variety of ways. They work with specific groups and in different contexts. These include school and community-based projects. Meta-analysis of these programmes indicates a modest positive impact on young people (Rhodes, 2005 and DuBois, 2011).

- **Some forms of mentoring are particularly challenging to deliver.** Not all mentoring relationships will work and careful understanding is needed in order to know how to support relationships and minimise the impact of those that do not succeed (McArthur et al., forthcoming). Research shows that mentoring the most vulnerable groups of young people is problematic and may even be harmful (Spencer, R 2009).

- **Mentoring is complex**: its complexity is reflected in recent cost-benefit analysis of US mentoring programmes which indicate that there is insufficient evidence to justify mentoring as a Government-funded societal intervention, as their social returns have not been conclusively shown to justify their cost (DuBois, 2013).

- A key research message is **the need for research-informed, differentiated and locally-based mentoring initiatives.** These need to be based on careful research and development, not only to be effective, but to reduce the possibility of causing harm to young people.

- **Focus mentoring on encouraging / supporting more first-generation higher education applicants:** The evidence suggests that mentoring for high attaining young people who are first generation in their families to consider higher education is likely to have a more significant impact than for other groups (see Woods & Preciado, 2016 & Cummings et al., 2012).

How intergenerational mentoring works

At the end of S4 school staff identify a group of pupils who have the ability and motivation to progress to higher education. The project team then match each pupil with an appropriate volunteer mentor as they begin S5. This is often a retired professional from a subject area the pupils are interested in studying. The mentor and mentee meet weekly and establish a relationship that extends into the pupil's S6 year and beyond. Mentors are supported in this process and there are regular sessions for them to discuss progress with each other and programme staff.

For those pupils entering S5 and thinking about university for the first time, the process of application, necessary work experience and the pressure of academic work are often daunting. Mentors provide an essential source of academic support, guidance and encouragement through this process.

- **Mentoring widens young peoples' networks and understanding of higher education and the professions:** High attaining young people in some of Scotland's communities have limited understanding of the professions and lack access to social networks that can facilitate career understanding, work experience and knowledge of higher education (Wilson et al., 2014).

- **Glasgow's mentoring model works and is cost-effective:** An intergenerational model of mentoring developed in Glasgow has successfully addressed these issues and supported young people to enter more competitive professionally orientated courses (Wilson et al., 2014). It now works with 6 secondary schools in Glasgow and supports in excess of 80 young people. It draws largely on volunteer retirees and the indications are that it is a cost-effective and successful intervention.

The role of research in the development of mentoring programmes

The area of Widening Participation needs new exploratory research and development (Gorard et al., 2012). In Scotland, we need more information about what actually happens to first-generation young people when they apply and enter higher education. We need to understand how existing processes within schools and universities are modelled on applicants from middle and higher income families, and as a result intentionally or not disadvantage first-generation applicants. A research-informed examination of intergenerational mentoring illuminates the reality of inequality, the ways in which some young people may struggle to engage with institutions and institutional processes with which their more socio-economically advantaged peers are more familiar and less intimidated.

Mentoring and inclusion in higher education - the bottom line:

- Despite a number of initiatives over a prolonged period the percentage of first-generation young people that manage to enter higher education has remained consistently low.

- Policy needs to move further towards strengthening the capacity of schools and communities to develop young people and reduce inequality in terms of their participation in higher education.

- Building on the evidence of the UK literature intergenerational mentoring presents an affordable opportunity for intervening to support young people in their progression towards higher education.

- Pilot work and a 3 year funded research & development project with the University of Strathclyde and Glasgow City Council has progressed this form of mentoring in Scotland.

- Research with this project shows young people benefit by forming useful relationships with their mentors, better understand the opportunities available to them and realise their potential to progress to higher education.

- A measured expansion of locally developed intergenerational mentoring programmes should now form part of broader Scottish-wide agenda to expand access to higher education.

- For these to progress in Scotland, they should be locally developed and have mechanisms and resources so that their efficacy and cost-effectiveness can be monitored.

Conclusion

The persistent policy focus of addressing 'deficits' of young people unable to access higher education needs to shift towards challenging the structural barriers that can stunt such young people's educational progress and access to higher education. While operating in a different cultural context to much of the US based research, recent research in Scotland indicates the value of intergenerational mentoring as an intervention for higher attaining young people who are first generation applicants to higher education. A focus on expanding intergenerational mentoring offers a research informed, innovative and practical step towards increasing participation in this. An iterative form of research and development in this area will provide opportunity for mentoring to be informed and refined as it progresses.

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