

Nisai Virtual School: School Improvement Partner visit

28/01/2026

Methodology

Interviews with Area Managers, Head of Mentoring and Head of Service
Review of relevant documentation.

An Overview of Current Practices and Impact of mentoring

From my initial reading of the literature on mentoring it appears that there are no nationally recognised evaluation frameworks directly applicable to Nisai. This, and the necessarily limited perspective represented by the management team means that any conclusions in this report should be treated as provisional until validated by direct observation of mentoring in practice and interviews with other key stakeholders. The absence of comparative data on mentoring schemes across virtual schools is a further challenge, however if Nisai were to invest in the production of robust evaluation tools for mentoring then this could be a valuable contribution to the field. I will try to suggest what this might look like throughout the report.

Introduction

Although Nisai is primarily a provider of online education, focussed on supporting learners who face barriers to accessing traditional schooling, a key element of its approach is the provision of mentoring, both virtual and in person. Mentoring at Nisai is designed to foster academic achievement, personal growth, and social development in both virtual and physical settings. This report examines the current mentoring provision at Nisai, outlining its structure, delivery methods, and impact on learners.

Strategic Design and Purpose

The managers described how mentoring at Nisai evolved from a response to specific student need at a vocational training centre in Nottingham to a national service with mentors operating from the far Southwest to the Northeast of England. Despite the evolutionary nature of its origins mentoring at Nisai now forms part of a coherent offer of blended learning. Integrated into the broader provision map mentoring is used to ensure that each learner receives the holistic support required to meet their individual needs. The mentoring programme typically involves the assignment of a dedicated mentor to each student, who acts as a consistent point of contact throughout their learning journey and who can deliver both virtual and face to face mentoring.

The managers described the typical professional experience of the mentors, often from education or social care backgrounds with substantial experience in both academic and pastoral work. Managers articulated the key elements of their service as;

- Personalised Support: managers outlined some of the very significant challenges the learners they support face and described the flexible range of responses they were able to deliver to mitigate.
- Progress Monitoring: Mentors track academic progress and wellbeing, coordinating with teaching staff and families using the comprehensive range of data available in the shared digital platform
- For some students mentoring prioritises emotional and social wellbeing, offering a safe space for learners to discuss concerns and develop coping strategies offering “real world” experience to complement virtual activity
- Transition Support: Managers described how mentoring supports preparation for key transitions, such as moving between key stages, re-integration into mainstream education, or progression to further education or employment.

Monitoring and impact

Managers described how mentoring provision at Nisai has a demonstrable impact on learner outcomes. Students benefit from increased engagement, improved self-confidence, and enhanced resilience. Managers were able to give examples of how the consistent presence of a mentor helps to mitigate the potential isolation of virtual learning, promoting a sense of belonging and community. This seems to me to be a significant component of the Nisai model, the “blending” of virtual and face to face interventions and I wonder if the research work already underway could be used to further elaborate the benefits of this approach. Managers were able to articulate how academic outcomes are also positively influenced, with mentored students typically demonstrating improved attendance, assignment completion rates, and attainment. They argue that the holistic approach ensures that progress is not limited to academic achievement but encompasses personal and social development as well.

Suggested area for further work

Although the managers had no difficulty in providing examples of positive outcomes achieved through mentoring it might be worth considering adopting more formal measures of wellbeing, particularly given the range and intensity of some of the barriers to learning experienced by many of the mentees. I have seen validated psychometric tests used effectively for this purpose (for example SDQ, Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, widely used and free) Where there are clear goals, tools such as GAS, Goal Attainment Scaling can be very helpful in charting non-academic progress.

Ideally, monitoring progress towards EHCP outcomes should be a good measure of progress however the managers noted a few difficulties with using EHCPs as a robust monitoring tool. Some of the outcomes are “woolly” and hard to operationalise, some are outdated and inaccurate while others are template driven and impersonal with obvious copy and paste standard text. Some of the professional advice is of very poor quality and extremely generic.

Challenges and Areas for Development

One of the outstanding features of provision at the Stockton campus is the degree of collegiate support experienced by the teachers. This is in stark contrast to the “lone worker” aspect of mentoring. Managers describe the extraordinary lengths they go to to support their teams, but I would be curious to know what the perception of the mentors is. It is clear from the managers that mentors are managing diverse and challenging case loads supporting learners with a wide range of issues from social anxiety to dyslexia.

Suggested area for development

Involve the mentors in a review of current arrangements for professional development. The managers were keen to emphasise the highly individualised responses mentors are skilled at delivering, however there are some key elements to training for working with learners with the difficulties the managers described very clearly.

For example;

- Understanding SEND and the legal framework, person centred approaches and co-production
- Trauma Informed Practice, understanding trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences, trauma responses, creating psychological safety in mentoring relationships
- Mental Health and Wellbeing, motivational interviewing, solution focused approaches, understanding self-harm.
- Communication and Relationship Building, active listening and empathetic responding, working with reluctant or resistant students, managing difficult conversations.
- Goal Setting and Progress Monitoring, formal systems for goal setting, using data to inform mentoring, linking mentoring goals to EHCP outcomes.

Managers described how in a small number of cases, for example dealing with suicidal ideation and severe self-harm mentors and managers would benefit from clinical supervision, I would endorse that request.

Conclusion

Nisai's mentoring programme is a vital element of its educational offering, underpinning student success and wellbeing in virtual and face to face contexts. Through personalised, consistent, and holistic support, Nisai effectively addresses the diverse needs of its learners, ensuring that each student is supported to thrive academically and personally. Ongoing investment in mentoring provision will be key to maintaining and extending these positive outcomes.

Graeme Pyle, School Improvement Partner