

# Universities shun school mentoring 'to guard global reputation'

Northern Powerhouse Partnership appeals to universities to follow Sheffield Hallam's lead on pandemic mentoring for secondary pupils

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Some universities in northern England declined to sign up to pandemic mentoring for schoolchildren because they saw it as diminishing their global prestige, but the struggles of the government's National Tutoring Programme leave acute need for such support, according to the Northern Powerhouse Partnership's education adviser.



The NPP, which represents business and civic leaders across the north, is appealing for more universities to follow the lead of [Sheffield Hallam University's Grow programme](#), which employs and trains its graduates to act as mentors and is expected to reach 2,400 school pupils across South Yorkshire this year after winning £500,000 from the UK Community Renewal Fund to expand.

The NPP proposed to the Department for Education in 2020 a national mentoring programme in which university graduates would mentor secondary school pupils, addressing fears over graduate unemployment in the pandemic and helping pupils left struggling by Covid's disruption to education.

The DfE "liked a lot of it but didn't like mentoring", perhaps seeing it as a "soft option", and the concept "morphed" into the department's subject-based National Tutoring Programme, said Frank Norris, education adviser to the NPP and a former senior inspector at Ofsted.

The National Tutoring Programme, delivered centrally by the UK arm of Dutch multinational company Randstad, was more than 90 per cent below target for pupil enrolment last month, [according to figures presented to MPs](#).

However, the NPP took the mentoring idea to Sheffield Hallam, which created the Grow programme as a "[trauma-informed approach](#)" aimed at "reconnecting young people" with "a relatable graduate role model, who can provide pupils with a sense of belonging and belief in their future".

Barnsley Council provided funding for all its schools and colleges to take part in Grow between January and the summer this year, while higher education minister Michelle Donelan [declared herself](#) “very impressed” after meeting students and mentors on the “fantastic scheme”.

The NPP “encouraged all of the other northern universities – we contacted them directly – to engage with Hallam to see whether or not they could take it forward”, Mr Norris said. “A few did – but not many of them did much more than just talk to [Hallam].”

“One told me they had to remain focused on their core work and this was ensuring they acquired the most able students who could enhance their worldwide reputation for academic research. NPP is clear that levelling up requires a commitment from all universities to serve the needs of all students,” he continued.

The allegation comes as Ms Donelan [seeks to encourage universities to work more closely with schools](#) to improve pupil attainment and social mobility.

The NPP was “totally committed to local people being given the power to come up with local solutions – and the Hallam project does that entirely”, said Mr Norris. “It’s no surprise to us that the Hallam programme has got legs whereas the National Tutoring Programme is struggling at the moment to connect. [The challenge] was always going to be: how are you going to persuade local schools to connect with an organisation or people they have had no connection with before?”

Mr Norris added: “I’m really pleased the Grow mentoring programme has been as successful as it has been.

“It’s a real shame that others – and we have pushed it as hard as we can – haven’t got on board with it...It’s still not too late for universities in the north to engage with Hallam.”

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