

## Exploring the impact of the 2013 Unlocking Potential programme

Victoria Spalding

### Summary

Twenty disadvantaged young people took part in the 2013 Unlocking Potential programme. The programme teams the young person with an athlete mentor who helps them deliver a social action project. The programme aims to improve the young people's confidence, develop important life skills and raise their aspirations for the future. This paper explores the impact of the programme on the young people involved via a longitudinal qualitative method. The feedback on the programme was overwhelmingly positive and all the young people interviewed felt that they had gained in confidence, self-belief, motivation and organisational skills as a result of the programme. The young people entered the programme with high aspirations for the future. These aspirations remained unchanged throughout the programme; however, some young people did report that they had greater optimism for the future. Unfortunately, over half of the young people taking part in Unlocking Potential declined from the last round of interviews so it is not known if they had a different experience.

### Background

The second year of the Unlocking Potential programme started in March 2013. The programme is a joint venture between AQA and the Dame Kelly Holmes Legacy Trust (DKHL Trust). It places 20 disadvantaged young people in a mentoring scheme to work with a mentor to deliver a social action project of their choice in their local community. The programme aims to:

- develop participants' skills and knowledge
- increase participants' confidence, self-belief and motivation
- raise participants' aspirations and encourage them to aim higher in life.

In order to be eligible to take part in the programme the young people must be between the ages of 14 and 19 and have been held back by either challenging personal circumstances, low self-esteem or lack of local opportunities. They should also have strength of character and have previously demonstrated commitment, enthusiasm, determination or integrity, despite challenging circumstances out of their control. The young people are nominated by their teachers or youth leaders and the twenty young people who are ultimately invited to take part are selected from the nominations by a judging panel, made up of representatives from the world of education and industry.

The selected young people participate in three national events and a number of one-on-one mentoring sessions with a member of the DKHL Trust's team of inspirational athlete mentors. The programme runs over a six month period, starting in May and finishing in October. Whilst the young people are paired with athlete mentors, the programme is not aimed specifically at sport – rather it focuses on overcoming adversity and developing life skills and confidence. The young people will work with their mentors to deliver a social action project of the young person's choice. The aim of the project was to make a positive impact in their local community.

The DKHL Trust runs a continual evaluation of the programme. The evaluation is based on data from self-reflection exercises completed by the young people as part of the programme, as well

as feedback from the athlete mentors. The 2012 report found that 85% of the young people completed the programme. All those who completed the programme were reported to have demonstrated that they had developed personal traits, such as determination, which had been identified by the young person as an area important to them in which they wished to improve (DKHL Trust 2012). The data used in the DKHL Trust report was primarily collected as part of the programme to help the young people reflect upon their journey through the programme. It is therefore likely to be influenced by a positive bias as neither young person nor mentor would feel encouraged to report negative effects during the self-reflection exercise. Furthermore, the DKHL Trust report does not evaluate the features of the programme which were most instrumental in helping the young people, or follow-up after completion of the programme. This paper aims to explore the success of the 2013 programme using data which are independent from the programme materials.

Previous research has shown that mentoring schemes have had a positive impact in a range of areas including education/work, mental health, physical health and behaviour (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). The relationship between the mentor and youth has been found to be crucial and most likely to promote positive outcomes when it is close, consistent and enduring (Rhodes and DuBois, 2006). The closeness of the relationship depends upon the compatibility of the mentor and the young person in their personalities and interests. The mentor's ability to empathise with the young person along with shared expectations or goals for the relationship also improves closeness (Spencer, 2006; Bernier & Larose, 2005; Madia & Lutz, 2004). The consistency of the relationship has been found to be better if there is regular contact. Regular contact may result in more positive outcomes somewhat indirectly by facilitating a closer relationship between mentor and young person (Rhodes et al, 2006). The duration of the relationship also impacts on the outcome of the intervention, with the greatest benefits being evident in relationships that lasted for more than a year (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Positive outcomes are achieved through well implemented programmes. Mentoring schemes benefit from on-going training of mentors, structure to the mentoring relationship and concrete expectations for both parties, inclusion of caregivers and the wider community, and monitoring of the schemes effectiveness. Whilst some mentor programmes have had a demonstratively positive impact on the young people participating, research does indicate that poorly implemented programmes have little benefit and can even have adverse effects (DuBois, Holloway, Jeffery, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002). Analysis of data from several mentor interventions reveals that the effect size for positive outcomes is generally small and short-lived (Aseltine, Dupre, Lamlein, 2000; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008).

Given the research evidence suggesting that mentoring interventions do not always have a positive impact, it is of interest to investigate the impact the Unlocking Potential has on its participants. The first of the three desired outcomes from Unlocking Potential, 'development of skills and knowledge' is self-evident through the young person's completion of the social project, but the success of the other two aims is not so transparent. Is there an improvement in self-confidence, motivation and aspirations arising from a result of the programme and, if so, do these improvements remain after the programme has concluded? The literature discussed so far has evaluated the success of mentoring interventions by comparing outcomes of the mentored group with a control group – made up of youths in similar circumstances who have not been mentored. However, the young people who take part in the Unlocking Potential programme are a diverse group with unique and exceptionally challenging personal circumstances. This means that it would be impossible to find a suitable control group to evaluate the programme. Therefore this paper will explore the successfulness of the Unlocking Potential programme in meeting its key objectives using a qualitative methodology.

## Method

The young people taking part in the 2013 Unlocking Potential programme were interviewed at three time points:

- round 1: 1<sup>st</sup> national event at beginning of the programme (face to face interviews)
- round 2: 2<sup>nd</sup> national event two months into the programme (face to face interviews)
- round 3: 1 week after the 3<sup>rd</sup> national event after completion of the programme (telephone interviews).

Semi-structured interview schedules were used and are included in the Appendix. The first two interviews were conducted by a team of four researchers, due to the time constraints during the national events. The telephone interviews after the Unlocking Potential programme had ended were conducted by a single researcher. Data from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interviews from each round were first analysed in isolation and then analysed again collectively looking at common themes across the time periods. The final themes were defined by their extensiveness or by the participants' strength of feeling for a particular issue.

The nature of the study does not allow firm conclusions to be drawn about the impact of the programme on outcomes for these young people. This study was limited, firstly, by the lack of control group and no follow-up after completion of the project. This means that firm conclusions cannot be drawn about how these participants would have fared had they not taken part in Unlocking Potential, or if Unlocking Potential will have a lasting impact on their lives. Secondly, the methodology only collects self-report data from a small self-selecting sample, which means it is highly susceptible to positive bias. The data from the interviews was not analysed for inter-rater agreement, however given the methodological limitations and the resulting limited conclusions which can be drawn, the analysis was conducted at the appropriate level for this purpose.

## Participants

All twenty Unlocking Potential participants were invited to take part in the evaluation of the programme. The table below shows how many young people took part in each round of interviews.

**Table 1: Number of young people interviewed at each round**

	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3
<b>Males</b>	11	9	4
<b>Females</b>	7	6	6
<b>Total</b>	18	15	10

In order to put the findings in context, this section briefly outlines the circumstances surrounding the ten participants who took part in the final round of interviews. Five of the participants were doing, or had just completed, their A-levels; the remaining five were studying for GCSE qualifications. Around half of the participants described themselves as confident and outgoing in the initial interviews, although it was mainly the males reporting that they felt confident which is in keeping with gender bias normally seen in self-report data, where males tend to under-report problems with self-esteem (Oppenheim, 1992). Four of the participants explicitly reported that they struggled with self-confidence. Only two of the participants stated that they were doing poorly in their academic studies. The challenging circumstances these young people faced were varied, including: eating disorders, partial sightedness, cancer, learning difficulties, caring for parent, bullying, involvement in gangs, deprived background, drug use, and being in foster care.

## Findings

The interviews covered five main areas: projects, working with mentors, support, national events, and outcomes. The themes within each area are discussed below with illustrative quotes.

### Projects

The participants' comments on their community projects fell loosely into three themes: expectations, motivation, and challenges.

#### *Expectations*

At the first national event the participants were asked about the ideas they had for their community project. At this early stage some already had an idea of what they wanted to do, whilst others were unsure. A handful of the participants had already taken part in other community projects prior to being selected for the Unlocking Potential programme; these young people had more preconceptions about the programme and more developed ideas regarding their community project.

By the second national event the young people were starting to develop plans for their community projects. Many had chosen projects very close to their personal experiences. The mentors helped with the logistics but all the ideas came first from the young people. Several young people intended to continue their project after the programme had finished. At this point many were nervous of delivering their community projects but most were excited about carrying them out.

#### *Motivation*

After the final event most participants that were interviewed had completed their projects or were due to run their events in the following weeks. The majority of projects involved organising sports clubs for children in the local area. The participants who chose this as their community project said it was because they had an interest in sport and wanted to improve their community as their area had limited sporting facilities for youth.

*They could unlock their own potential so they could be good at football, boxing or sports and, you know, just to get them out there and not be at home, you know, playing on PlayStation as well as being on the streets so, yes, that was the purpose of my project.*

Male participant

Other participants chose to raise money for charity through organising a fundraising event. The events included talent shows, fashion shows, cake sales, bag packing, a sponsored run and a themed sports day. Some of the participants chose to raise money for a charity which had helped them through difficult times. Others chose a charity which they already knew and had fundraised and volunteered for before. A few participants chose charities which were very current, for example one participant chose to raise money for children in Syria. Two of the participants chose to raise money for a charity that they wished had been able to help them through a difficult time.

*When I was younger, I, like, phoned Childline once but I was put on hold for like 10 or 15 minutes and, in the end, I just, like, put the phone down but I think, like, obviously if people, like, raise more money then, like, more, like, calls would be answered.*

Female participant

*Mum and dad both did drugs and they were alcoholics (as a result he lived in foster care) and so I thought I'd much rather help the community (through renovating the drugs and alcohol rehabilitation centre garden) and it gets me over that, you know, stumbling blocks.*

Male participant

### *Challenges*

Not all of the participants were able to realise their original idea for their community project and many compromises had to be made. Several participants originally wanted to use public places to stage their event but could not secure permission for use. Health and safety also caused frustrating barriers for some participants, particularly those who were hosting sporting events. Two of the participants' projects were delayed because they were changing school and could not set up their project in time in their new school. Some projects could not be carried out because CRB clearance could not be given in time. A small number of the participants were held back by personal and family illness. Almost all of the participants commented that school commitments and exam pressures meant that they had to fit the project around their work which was stressful.

*For people like me who are doing A-levels or even people who were doing GCSEs, like, it was a bit stressful because you needed to do lots of work around exam time.*

Female participant

The clash with exams also meant that they could not always find support from friends and other students who were busy. At least two of the participants reported that they had taken on too much by themselves as they were unable to find support. Many participants struggled to get sufficient numbers to attend their event; school work, religious holidays and apathy were sighted as some of the suspected reasons for poor turnout. One participant tried to coordinate with larger companies but felt that she was not taken seriously by them. Whilst she was disappointed by this experience she persevered and had some success after receiving help from her mentor.

### **Working with mentors**

The participants' comments on working with mentors fell loosely into three themes: contact, bonding, and opening up.

#### *Contact*

At the second event all the participants were positive about the relationship they had formed with their mentors; however, several participants said that they were struggling to meet mentors due to training camps and the mentor's other commitments, which was frustrating for them. This issue was brought up again after the final event where several participants found that their mentor had been unavailable for a national event, mentor session, or charity event, which the participants found particularly disappointing. Nevertheless, most mentors managed to meet up with their participant at least once a month and all the participants felt they received adequate level of mentor support. Contact between visits was problematic in cases where the mentor relied on the email system, as the emails between mentor and participant were passed via the teacher. The lack of direct contact meant that messages were delayed and impersonal. The participants who were able to use twitter and/or chat directly by phone with their mentor were happier with the communication.

#### *Bonding*

All the young people were positive about their relationship with their mentors. They felt they could talk openly with their mentors and that the visits not only helped plan their community

projects but also helped them with personal problems. Most felt inspired by their mentors. By the final event it was clear that the mentors had been very successful at forming a positive relationship with the participants. The young people described how they found their mentors easy to talk to and fun to be around.

*It was really easy to get along with her. When I first met her I could just basically tell her anything.*

Female participant

*I'm usually generally nervous when I talk to new people but, like, after a short amount of time, it just felt natural talking with him and I didn't feel nervous or anything and he was just, like, I could have a casual chat with him, it was easy.*

Male participant

Several participants described how their mentor had taken the time to do social activities that they would enjoy, such as bike riding or going to a rugby match, which helped develop a bond.

### *Opening up*

The participants described the relationship as close and that they trusted the mentor enough to be open with their problems. The participants appreciated the mentors sharing their experiences, particularly the difficult ones because this enabled the young people to relate to the mentors and also gave them the confidence to share their troubles. Several participants said that talking to their mentors had helped them deal with problems in the past as well as issues that they were currently dealing with.

*I started opening up and then I told him about all my problems and then he basically just helped me to talk about how we deal with situations.*

Male participant

*He told me how he had bad times in his life and how he bounced back from them and I kind of relate myself to those times as well in a different way and he kind of gave me options as to how to get back into my right frame of mind from those bad times in my life.*

Male participant

*So on one of the visits we were supposed to be doing the booklet but it just ended up me sort of pretty much ranting about my sister (who was seriously ill in hospital) and stuff so it was lovely really getting the chance to actually talk to someone rather than just sort of like having teachers being like 'yeah well just get on with it'.*

Female participant

All of the participants admired their athletes and saw them as a positive role model. Some participants felt that after the project they regarded their athlete as a friend. All of the participants were keen to keep in contact with their athlete and most expected to stay in contact.

### **Support**

The participants' comments on support fell loosely into two themes: support from the community and existing role models.

### *Support from the community*

Several young people talked about getting a lot of support, typically from home, teachers, carers, friends, families and the Trust. The support the participants received was not only vital for success in the community project, but also encouraged the participants and brought them closer to their communities.

*It made me feel better because I didn't feel like I was alone and that people would want to help me and stuff, it was a nice feeling, like, it just felt nice that they wanted to help me.*

Male participant

### *Existing role models*

It was clear that many participants already had positive role models in their lives. Some referred to their parents, who were supportive, and described them as good role models. Others described their relationship with teachers who helped them with their project. In almost all cases the participants had a teacher who had been instrumental in helping them with the project, often the teacher who nominated them. The participants described how they became closer to their teachers through working on the project and many felt they would turn to this person in the future should they need support. Some participants said that they would not have turned to this person for help prior to the project.

*I still talk to her about the difficulties I'm going through in school now, she always helps me.*

Female participant

*(before) I'd be very reluctant to go and talk to her because I'd be like so scared and stuff but afterwards sort of I've changed a lot because I can talk to her about, like, more than I would expect like more than just the project and stuff.*

Female participant

### **National events**

The participants' comments on the national events fell loosely into three themes: experience at the events, broadening horizons, and difficulties.

#### *Experience at the events*

At the first event the young people were initially nervous, but soon relaxed due to the welcoming and positive attitude of the day and the activities. The young people came to the event with few preconceptions of what the day would entail. Several of the participants were unaware that they had been nominated and only discovered that they were invited to take part a week prior to the event. Most participants felt honoured that they had been selected for the programme.

At the second national event the participants were asked to present their ideas to a panel, similar to a 'Dragons Den' experience. Many of the participants expressed concerns with public speaking and found this extremely challenging. However, for many the experience was worthwhile as it enabled them to 'come out of their comfort zone' and gain experience speaking to audiences. Two participants even felt that this was a turning point for them, one described that he realised that he could speak with passion about his project.

*From that day I think I feel my confidence more and more as I'm not really too nervous about presenting it to other people.*

Male participant

The nervousness surrounding the second event meant that many participants made friends as they bonded over the experience.

The final event was well received by those who attended. Participants felt that it was a rewarding experience and made them feel proud of their achievements. Several participants said how thankful they were that they had been given the opportunity to take part in the Unlocking Potential programme.

#### *Broadening horizons*

The young people valued being able to meet each other at the national events and have the opportunity to share their experiences. For many, meeting the other participants helped them feel included and the events had a friendlier and more accepting environment than they found at home. The national events allowed the participants to develop their people skills and make new friends. Several participants commented that it was nice to talk to 'someone different'; many had never left their home county and had limited opportunities to talk to people from different areas. Participants described the national events as having broadened their horizons.

#### *Difficulties*

A few of the participants raised concerns about travelling to the national events which, for many, involved long and costly journeys. One participant could not attend one of the events because there was no teacher available to take her. Another nearly didn't attend because the school had no funds to pay for the ticket and her family could not afford to pay travel expenses.

#### **Outcomes**

The participants' comments on the outcomes from the Unlocking Potential programme, for them, fell loosely into five themes: development through programme, increased confidence, social improvements, educational gains, and future focus.

#### *Development through the programme*

At the first national event the majority of participants hoped that the project would improve their self-confidence; leadership, independence, maturity and communication were listed as skills that they would like to develop. They were also keen to help their community, make their families proud and gain a sense of achievement. By the second national event several participants felt that the project was already helping them build confidence, trust and determination, and be more pro-active in improving their lives. Many reported that their social skills had improved, and that they were better at communicating and presenting themselves. Some felt they had become more open and were better at empathising with others. By the third national event it was clear that most participants felt that they had benefitted from the project, these benefits falling loosely into four categories: self-confidence, social, educational and future goals (but with overlap across these areas).

#### *Increasing confidence*

Participants most commonly talked about increases in personal assurance; almost all reported that their self-confidence had improved. Several participants had said that they felt they were a confident person at the first event and some had even said that they were over-confident; nevertheless, all the participants interviewed felt that their confidence had been increased by the Unlocking Potential experience. This new-found confidence manifested itself in different ways: some felt they were now more outgoing; others felt that they were less nervous and more able to deal with unexpected events; several commented that they felt more able generally.

*I speak out now instead of when I used to keep myself to myself and now I can talk to people a lot easier and make friends a lot easier as well.*

Female participant

*I've been told like just more confident and not worried about saying how I feel or doing something like the community project. I've been able to do stuff on my own really, become more independent.*

Female participant

*It opened my eyes and, like, it made me realise what I am capable of.*

Male participant

*I keep saying confident but that's like the main thing like I've actually gone through and actually achieved it and I feel really like I can do this like I can achieve it and I can.*

Female participant

Several felt that they were now more prepared to try new things. One girl commented that before she did not have the confidence to even take public transport, but now she felt confident enough to consider leaving home for university. Another participant described how working with her mentor had helped her to try and adopt a more positive mindset; she now felt that she could achieve when before she would have thought she would fail.

*Before then I'd say things that ..., I'd say I'm going to do something but I wouldn't end up doing it but now I say what I'm going to do and I actually do end up doing it.*

Male participant

*I suppose before the Unlocking Potential stuff, I'd be definitely a lot more reluctant to look into stuff. Like now I know I definitely want to go and do a politics degree but like before I'd be too scared to even do the research in case I was wrong and sort of stuff like that but now, like, at least up until university I've got a clear cut plan.*

Female participant

Several participants talked about their pride in their achievements. Many received positive feedback from the community and enjoyed seeing others happy because of their actions.

#### *Social improvements*

Participants also talked about social improvements. They felt that they had improved their people skills, were better able to trust others and be more open, and were better at forming relationships. A few participants talked about how the experience had made them no longer feel isolated.

*July last year, I was in, like, isolation at school and stuff ... I wasn't really involved in anything but now obviously I'm writing for the school newspaper and everything.*

Female participant

One participant described how he had become more honest, learning that it was better to be truthful about his achievement than to make up excuses when he had not managed to achieve all he set out to.

*Towards the end, you know, if he told me to do something, I just did it or if I didn't do it, I'd tell him the reason why I didn't do it instead of coming up with excuses.*

Male participant

Most participants felt that they were now more comfortable with public speaking and presenting in front of others. Many felt that they had gained leadership skills, and that the experience had helped them mature and become more independent.

#### *Educational gains*

Participants also talked about educational gains. They felt the project had helped their organisation and motivation, which had improved their application to their school work.

*Before I used to be not very good at keeping time and it's helped because now I've been able to keep like a timetable so I was able to revise for my exams.*

Female participant

One participant directly attributed his good grades to his involvement with Unlocking Potential.

*I was really disorganised before Unlocking Potential came into my life, I was doing really badly, really poor in school, I wasn't really getting the grades I wanted and I was basically going to get kicked out but, you know, after the project, the help of the organisational skills, the motivation, the focus that the mentor helped and showed me and introduced me to, I mean my grades they dramatically improved that I got 4 As and 2 Bs*

Male participant

#### *Future focus*

Participants were asked about their future goals at the first national event, to see if their aspirations changed over the course of the project. The participants' future goals at this early stage were fairly ambitious, spanning further education and/or a career in sport, teaching, industry or the military, amongst others. However, these responses may be biased as participants would be unlikely to report aspiring to mundane careers at an event which was clearly geared towards encouraging them to aim high. After the final event the participants were once again asked what their plans for the future were and they reported similar aspirations to those expressed at the first event. However, in most cases the participants were now more confident and were optimistic that they could make their ambitions a reality.

*It's, like, helped me loads and made me think that if I put my mind to anything I can do it.*

Female participant

Participants commented that they were now more future-focused and determined to succeed. Some participants had amended their goals to make them more realistic; for example, one girl realised that she would rather focus on costume design than her original goal of fashion design because it was closer to her interests and a less pressured environment. One participant had completely changed her ambition from being an actress to being a teaching consultant; however, she did not attribute the change in direction to the Unlocking Potential programme. Several of the participants commented that whilst they felt that they had grown personally they were not sure if it was a direct result of Unlocking Potential or a natural part of growing up. It is

impossible to be sure that these positive developments would not have happened had the participants not been on the Unlocking Potential programme.

## Discussion

All of the participants interviewed were overwhelmingly positive about their Unlocking Potential experience. The interview data suggest that the projects were delivered successfully and that the mentors had developed a positive relationship with the participants. Working on the project also enabled the participants to develop positive relationships with others in their communities which, hopefully, will be long lasting. Participants reported greater self-assurance, as well as social and educational benefits, from taking part in the programme and felt more resolute about achieving their future goals.

This paper aimed to explore the successfulness of the Unlocking Potential programme in meeting its key objectives using a qualitative methodology. The first of the three desired outcomes 'develop participants' skills and knowledge' was not directly explored in the interview schedule, as it was felt that it would be self-evident that the young people had developed skills and knowledge if they completed the community project. All but one of the participants interviewed had completed, or were about to complete, their community project. During the interviews the participants spoke freely, and unprompted, about learning life skills such as time keeping, organisation and public speaking. Many commented that the Unlocking Potential programme had challenged them and had enabled them to develop these skills. Some participants reported putting these new skills to good use and had seen an improvement in their school work as a result. From the participants interviewed there is evidence that the programme accomplished its first outcome. However, only half of the original participants were interviewed. Nearly all the young people were approached to take part in the third round of interviewing; however, some declined entirely whilst others did not answer the phone. The participants who declined may have done so because they did not complete their project. Therefore the third round of interviews could be a biased subset and the programme may not have yielded such positive results for all of the young people.

The second of the desired outcomes was to 'increase participants' confidence, self-belief and motivation'. During the interviews the young people spoke frequently about confidence, and all of the participants in the second and third round of interviews felt that their confidence had improved greatly. This benefitted the participants' self-assurance as they felt more capable in social situations and had gained a greater sense of self-worth. It also had educational benefits as participants talked about how they felt more capable of success in the future, and how they were more prepared to apply themselves as they had seen how much they could achieve. Given that the second round of interviews involved almost all of the participants, the results strongly suggest that all of the young people felt that their confidence was improving. However, all of the participants used similar rhetoric: 'motivation', 'confidence', 'self-belief'. This rhetoric was used continually by the mentors and throughout the accompanying Unlocking Potential support material. The participants would have been very aware that the aim of the programme was to improve these three areas and it is likely therefore that they would have been inclined to report improvements, unintentionally introducing response bias. It is impossible to tell how much of the commentary reflects real improvements, and how much reflects a desire to please and give positive feedback about the mentor they were clearly fond of.

The third of the desired outcomes was to 'raise participants' aspirations and encourage them to aim high in life'. Interviews at the first event revealed that the majority of young people came to the Unlocking Potential event with high aspirations. By the third event participants were still reporting the same aspirations, though some felt more determined to make them happen in the future. Again, response bias may have made the participants report high aspirations when in reality they expected much less from life. It is not clear from the findings of this report that the

young people raised their aspirations, but the comments from the participants at the third national event suggest that participants were encouraged to continue to strive for goals in the future.

The interviews also illustrated some unexpected benefits of the Unlocking Potential programme. First, participants talked about the benefit of the national events in broadening their horizons and giving them the opportunity to speak to people from different circumstances. Many of the young people had not left their home county, so for many the national events provided an opportunity to see more of England and meet people from a different area. Participants also talked about the benefits of meeting the other young people taking part in the programme. For some this provided an opportunity to develop social skills, making friends with new people outside of their social environment. Some participants found it reassuring to meet other young people who live in difficult circumstances as at the Unlocking Potential events they were no longer in a minority. However, one of the drawbacks of the national events was the time and cost of travel; some struggled to fund the expensive train fares whilst others could not find an adult to take them. Participants commented that more assistance from Unlocking Potential in relation to funding fares and helping with travel arrangements could have helped them attend.

Secondly, the community project enabled the young people to form new or stronger relationships within their own community. Participants talked about making friends, making connections with local charity groups, and forming a stronger relationship with teachers. Teachers played a huge supportive role for many of the projects, working with the young people and helping them realise their projects. Most of the participants had a teacher who already acted as a mentor in their life and normally it was this teacher who nominated them. Several participants said that they were already close to this individual though the project made them closer. Others said that they had not felt that close to the teacher before the project but now felt closer and comfortable enough to turn to them in the future should they need help or support. From the participants interviewed it seems that Unlocking Potential has strengthened relationships and support networks for these young people within their communities. Previous research has also observed that mentoring programmes improve relationships with parents, peers, and other adults such as teachers (Rhodes et al, 2006). The Unlocking Potential programme benefits from including the wider community which, hopefully, then secures long lasting results. Strengthening the community support may also mitigate possible ill effects from the loss of the athlete mentors once the project is completed. Unfortunately, most of the support networks developed were within schools, and many of the young people will be leaving their school shortly to go on to further study at a new institution.

Analysis of the data identified some of the Unlocking Potential programme's strengths and weaknesses. Research has shown that a good relationship between the mentor and youth is crucial for positive outcomes (Rhodes et al, 2006). The athlete mentors were very capable at forming close relationships with their mentees. The comments from the participants suggest that mentors were clearly well matched to the young people, in terms of common interests and personalities, which is known to improve mentor relationships (Bernier et al, 2005; Madia et al, 2004). Some participants indicated that their mentors had taken them to see sports games or joined in favourite pastimes, such as cycling, to help them bond. The participants commented that they were able to relate to the athlete mentor and trusted them enough to talk through their problems, indicating that the athletes had succeeded in forming a close relationship with the young people. The mentor relationships may also have been strengthened by the structure of the programme. Research has shown that programmes with a structure to the mentor relationship and concrete expectations for both parties facilitate good mentor relationships and positive outcomes (Rhodes et al, 2006). The Unlocking Potential programme has a clear structure. The mentors are given booklets to work through with the participants, which not only give structure to the meetings but clear expectations for the young people. The mentors work with the young people on a community project, another concrete expectation that both parties

can share. Previous research has shown that mentor interventions yielded more positive results when they were youth-led rather than mentor-led (Rhodes et al, 2006). In the Unlocking Potential programme the young person chooses the community project and leads the ideas, which again may facilitate a better relationship. All of the participants wanted to keep in contact with their mentor after the programme finished and many of them expected to be able to. However, it is not yet known how much contact, if any, they will receive after the completion of the programme, and how this will affect the participants. It is intended that there will be a three month follow-up with the participants which will explore how long lasting the effects of the programme are. This would be a good opportunity to investigate how the young people feel about the reduced contact with their mentors.

Whilst the participants were overwhelmingly positive about the Unlocking Potential experience, some weaknesses of the programme were apparent. The timing of the programme meant that several of the activities clashed with important exams. This made it very stressful for the young people and made it hard for them to realise their projects in the timescale. One participant asked if it would be possible to start the programme in November so that less would need to be done around exam time. Other participants had difficulties because they started the programme in one school but had to finish in another school due to term dates and going to a college to do their A-levels.

The second limitation comes from the selection process. The young people are nominated on the grounds that they have 'strength of character and have previously demonstrated commitment, enthusiasm, determination, or integrity despite being held back by circumstances out of their control'. The result is that many of the young people nominated already have a supportive role model in their life (who has nominated them) and often have already gone on some form of intervention, or are already succeeding in their lives. This could explain why the young people had high expectations at the first event. Several of the participants talked about charity projects that they had already implemented; some of these had been set up of their own accord; others came about through the participants' involvement with other programmes they were taking part in. The young people who took part in the Unlocking Potential programme were in no doubt remarkable, deserving individuals who received benefits from the programme; however, without the Unlocking Potential programme they most likely would have succeeded anyway, partly because of the support they received at home but also because they had already shown determination to overcome their circumstances. There is very likely to be a more desperate group of young people living in difficult circumstances who have not yet been given the support to succeed and who would benefit even more from Unlocking Potential. Unfortunately, without anyone to nominate them they are unlikely to be able to take part in this programme.

## **Conclusions**

This report aimed to explore how the Unlocking Potential programme met its primary objectives. Data collected during interviews with the young people who took part in the programme suggest that Unlocking Potential was successful in meeting its first two objectives: to develop young people's skills and knowledge, and improve their confidence and motivation. It is not clear whether the third objective, to raise aspirations, has been achieved, as the young people already had high aspirations when they started the programme. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that the programme was particularly good at establishing a positive working relationship between the mentors and mentees. The programme also facilitated supportive relationships between the young people and members of their community. Many of the participants reported struggling with school work and completing the project, and it was suggested that this would be improved if the timing of the programme was altered to start in November. The feedback on the programme was overwhelmingly positive and all the participants interviewed said they gained a

tremendous amount from the experience, including: confidence, self-belief, motivation, organisational skills, the opportunity to try public speaking, new friendships and greater optimism for the future. Unfortunately, over half of the young people taking part in Unlocking Potential declined from the last round of interviews and it is not known if they had a less positive experience. It is clear that the young people interviewed for this study perceive that Unlocking Potential has had a positive impact on their life. However, due to the methodological limitations of the study, firm conclusions cannot be drawn regarding the actual long term impact of the Unlocking Potential programme.

## References

- Aseltine, R. H., Dupre, M., & Lamlein, P. (2000). Mentoring as a drug prevention strategy: An evaluation of Across Ages. *Adolescent and Family Health, 1*, 11-20.
- Bernier, A., & Larose, S. (2005). Academic mentoring in college: The interactive role of student's and mentor's interpersonal dispositions. *Research of Higher Education, 46*, 29-51.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101.
- DKHL Trust. (2012). Unlocking Potential 2012 Evaluation Report. Internal report.
- DuBois, D. L., Holloway, B. E., Valentine, J. C., & Cooper, H. (2002). Effectiveness of Mentoring Programmes for Youth: A Meta-Analytic Review. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 30*(2), 157-197.
- DuBois, D. L., & Silverthorn, N. (2005). Natural mentoring relationships and adolescent health: Evidence from a national study. *American Journal of Public Health, 95*, 518-524.
- Eby, L. T., Allen, T. D., Evans, S. C., Ng, T., & DuBois, D. L. (2008). Does Mentoring Matter? A Multidisciplinary Meta-Analysis Comparing Mentored and Non-Mentored Individuals. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour, 72*(2): 254-267.
- Grossman, J. B., & Rhodes, J. E. (2002). The test of time: Predictors and effects of duration in youth mentoring relationships. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 30*, 199-219.
- Madia, B. P., & Lutz, C. J. (2004). Perceived similarity, expectation-reality discrepancies, and mentors' expressed intention to remain in Big Brothers/Big Sisters Programmes. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 34*, 598-623.
- Oppenheim, A. N. (1992). *Questionnaire Design, Interviewing and Attitude Measurement*. Second edition. London: Continuum.
- Rhodes, J. E., & DuBois, D. L. (2006). Understanding and Facilitating the Youth Mentoring Movement. *Social Policy Report, 20*(3), 3-19.
- Spencer, R. (2006). Understanding the mentoring process between adolescents and adults. *Youth Society, 37*, 287-315.

## Appendix

First round interview (at first national event)

Questions	Useful prompts
<p>Can you just tell me your name (for the recorder)?</p> <p>Can you tell me a bit about yourself?</p>	<p>Your age</p> <p>Hobbies, what do you do in your spare time, any clubs/groups?</p> <p>Who do you spend your time with?</p> <p>Are you at school/work/college/apprenticeship (if yes, what are your favourite subjects, how do you find it)?</p>
<p>Could you tell me why you were nominated for the programme and who nominated you?</p>	<p>What did he/she say to you?</p> <p>How did you feel about being nominated (excited, nervous, proud)?</p>
<p>How would you describe yourself?</p>	<p>How would your friends describe you?</p> <p>Are you an outgoing/shy person?</p>
<p>How would you describe your confidence?</p>	<p>Would you say you are confident?</p> <p>Are you more confident in certain situations? If so, which situations?</p> <p>Would you like to be more confident?</p>
<p>How would you describe your motivation?</p>	<p>Are you a motivated person? Do you find it easy to achieve your goals or complete tasks?</p> <p>Hardworking/laid back</p> <p>Does your motivation differ depending on the situation (e.g. chores, school, hobbies)?</p>
<p>You will cover this later with your mentor, but briefly, what do you hope to achieve from the programme?</p> <p>What type of things do you think you will be doing during the programme? [expectations]</p>	<p>How do you think the programme will help you?</p> <p>Prompt for 3 personal aims - what skills do you want to develop? e.g. team work, communication, leadership, presentation skills</p>
<p>What are your goals for the future?</p>	<p>What do you want to be in the future?</p> <p>What do you want to do after you finish school/college/apprenticeship?</p> <p>Where do you see yourself in 5/10 years?</p>

## Second round interview (at second national event)

Questions	Useful prompts
<p><b><u>What have you been up to?</u></b></p> <p>You have been on the programme for around 2 months now, can you tell me a bit about what you have been doing?</p>	<p>What kind of support have you received so far?</p>
<p><b><u>Community Project</u></b></p> <p>Have you started your social action project in the community?</p> <p>Do you have a rough idea of what you want to do?</p> <p>How confident do you feel about doing your community project?</p>	<p>How have you found that?</p> <p>How sure are you that you will be able to achieve what you have planned to achieve?</p>
<p><b><u>Mentor relationship</u></b></p> <p>Can you tell me a bit about your athlete mentor?</p> <p>What is your relationship like?</p>	<p>How comfortable do you feel talking to your mentor?</p>
<p>How was your 1-1 visit with your mentor?</p>	<p>What did you do? Where were you?</p> <p>How did you find it?</p>
<p><b><u>Benefits, if any</u></b></p> <p>The answer to this may be nothing, and that is ok... Is there anything in particular you feel you have learnt/gained so far?</p>	<p>Skills and knowledge, confidence, self-belief and motivation, aspirations</p>
<p><b><u>Evaluation</u></b></p> <p>We are not from Unlocking Potential so please answer this next question honestly. Anything you say will not appear next to your name:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Any aspects you have enjoyed/disliked so far?</li> <li>• Thinking back to the first national team event is there anything which you think could have been improved?</li> <li>• Thinking back to your meetings with your mentor, anything that could have been improved?</li> <li>• Anything else you were expecting or that you would have like to have seen that you haven't?</li> </ul>	

## Third round interviews (after the final national event via telephone)

Questions	Useful prompts
<p><b><u>Community project</u></b></p> <p>What was your community project?</p> <p>Why did you chose this project?</p> <p>Who supported you with the project?</p> <p>What did you find difficult?</p> <p>What were you most proud of?</p>	<p>What made that particularly difficult?</p> <p>What made you proud?</p>
<p><b><u>Mentor relationship</u></b></p> <p>Who was your athlete mentor?</p> <p>What was it like working with your athlete mentor?</p> <p>How often did you meet?</p> <p>Did you communicate outside of the school visits (ie on the phone)?</p> <p>Was there enough support?</p> <p>Did they feel like a friend or a teacher?</p> <p>Did they support you with more things than just the project?</p> <p>Do you think you will keep in contact now the project is over?</p>	<p>Would you have liked to have met more often?</p> <p>How have you found that?</p> <p>What did you talk about on your mentor visits?</p> <p>How comfortable do you feel talking to your mentor?</p>
<p><b><u>Community support</u></b></p> <p>Is there anyone in particular, other than your mentor, who really supported you with your project?</p> <p>Were you close with this person before?</p> <p>Do you think your relationship has become closer?</p> <p>Will you turn to this person for support in the future?</p> <p>Did you get support from friends?</p>	<p>If a teacher, was it the teacher who nominated you?</p> <p>Would you have asked for help from this person before Unlocking Potential?</p>
<p><b><u>Development</u></b></p> <p>Thinking back to the first event can you remember how you felt?</p> <p>Looking back to the first event do you feel different to how you were at the start?</p> <p>In your packs you had a wheel where you identified things you wanted to work on. Can you remember what some of them where?</p> <p>Do you think your XXX has improved?</p> <p>How did the project help with XXX?</p> <p>Can you think of an example of how this</p>	<p>How do you feel different? What sort of things have changed?</p> <p>If they commented that they wanted to improve their confidence, substitute confidence into XXX</p>

<p>has improved?</p> <p>Can you think of one thing that made the biggest difference to you?</p> <p>Is there anything that you feel has improved that was not on your wheel?</p> <p>How did you feel at the final event?</p>	
<p><b><u>Aspirations</u></b></p> <p>What are your plans for next year?</p> <p>What do you plan to do after finishing school/college?</p> <p>Have you always wanted to do that?</p>	
<p><b><u>Feedback</u></b></p> <p>Do you have any messages that you would like to feed back to Unlocking Potential?</p>	<p>Any comments about how you found the programme?</p> <p>Any ways you can think the programme could be improved?</p>