

Thrive Mentoring

Evaluation report for 2023/24

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Executive Summary

The activity

The Thrive mentoring programme offers University of Reading second and final year undergraduates the opportunity to connect with a professional who is in an area of work they are interested in. This affords students the opportunity to seek advice and guidance from industry professionals to gain career clarity, whilst expanding their network and building their confidence.

The evaluation

The evaluation methodology was Type 2, a comparison of pre-post scores, with the intention of a comparison of graduate outcomes for Thrive mentees compared to those who did not participate, in the future.

Main findings

117 students in total completed the After survey, 22 of these were IMD Q1 and Q2 students.

The results showed an increase in Post-Thrive scores compared to pre-Thrive scores for students in the areas of:

- Self-reported confidence (effect size d = 0.57)
- Self-reported professional networks (effect size d = 1.44)

These differences were seen both overall and for IMDQ1 and Q2 students as a specific sub-group, apart from confidence which was not seen for IMDQ1 and Q2.

Conclusions/recommendations

The results suggest that Thrive has a positive impact on self-reported confidence and professional network development. In future, we will focus on increasing the number of IMD Q1 and Q2 students engaging in the Thrive mentoring scheme, and on increasing the impact on these students' confidence. Recommendations include more personalised support for disadvantaged and underrepresented students such as 1:1 drop in

appointments to receive assistance in choosing a mentor, and trialling a priority access scheme specifically for these students to give them a head start, helping them engage with Thrive where currently many disengage after signing up due to a delay in being able to choose a mentor.

Introduction

Report caveats

This report is part of the first cycle of more robust evaluation in line with our new Access and Participation Plan. Therefore, we acknowledge that the evaluation still has limitations and we do not intend to over-claim the strength of any conclusions.

In particular, it is noted that this evaluation is based primarily on self-reported data, which can be impacted by many factors. There were practical challenges to data collection, and it is acknowledged that the limited sample size of pre- and post-intervention data reduces the robustness of claims about the programme's effectiveness beyond immediate reactions. Nevertheless, the data here still provide valuable insights into engagement and the immediate perceived benefits of the programme. Future evaluations will aim to strengthen data collection, ensuring a more robust set of pre- and post-intervention measures, and include comparison groups where possible. Long-term data will also become available.

Rationale

Progression gaps relate to students from specific backgrounds being at a disadvantage in terms of career progression and positive destinations upon graduating. Students from lower socioeconomic status groups face the largest progression gaps using both IMD2019 Q1-Q5 (5.2pp 4-year average gap) and Free School Meals (5.2pp 4-year average gap) metrics. These gaps are both below the national average (10% in 2021-22). The IMD2019Q1&2 - Q3,4&5 gap has increased over recently recorded years (2.9pp in 2017/18; 5.4pp in 2019/20), though the most recent 4-year aggregate gap for IMDQ1-Q5 shows signs of closing (OfS data dashboard).

One of the factors influencing career success is a network of contacts that can support, advise, mentor and advocate for you throughout your career, and TASO have found some <u>evidence</u> that offering a mentoring programme positively impacts progression.

Evidence (OfS, 2022; TASO, 2022; TASO, 2024) suggests that IMDQ1&2 students are the ones least likely to have professional networks to draw upon and benefit from receiving mentoring from professionals with similar backgrounds or who can help the students decide on next steps for their career.

The University has run Thrive Mentoring for over ten years now, and participation in the programme positively correlates to positive destinations in the Graduate Outcomes survey.

Intervention

For 2023/24 there were 2 full time members of staff involved in the operation of the programme, plus 0.1 FTE of a manager for these staff. The team were tasked with persuading professionals to be mentors, and signing up students to be mentees, training them how to fulfil their roles, dealing with operational queries, monitoring and evaluating

engagement, and intervening if engagement between mentors and mentees is not happening.

The mentoring programme was open to part 2 and final year undergraduate students. The programme had previously been focussed on part 2 students, widening to final year and master's students only if part 2 students were no longer signing up, and mentors were still available. The team identified that some students were not ready to engage with a mentor until their final year, which led to the decision to extend to final year students as standard for the first time in the 2023/24 programme. It was hoped that this would be particularly useful for IMD Q1&2 students.

Thrive's design is centred around students who are time-poor, have low social capital, lack experience and exposure to professionals in their fields of interest, without familial support structures who have experience of higher education. Significant consultation took place with students from widening participation backgrounds prior to our most recent cycle, and changes to the way the programme works such as students being able to browse pictures and descriptions of mentors, and revised communication methods were put in place for the 2023/24 scheme.

The updated mentoring programme operates flexibly. We advise mentors and mentees to meet for an hour a month, online or in-person, and there are minimum expectations about how long a mentoring relationship lasts, and the number of interactions (these include consistent communication, respect, relationships last between 3 and 9 months, and professionalism). Mentees and mentors can agree what works for them beyond these few expectations.

Context

This evaluation focusses on the 2023/24 academic year. Mentoring partnerships took place both online and in-person, and participants were those who engaged in an active mentoring partnership, which we classify as meeting at least once.

Link to Access & Participation Plan (APP)

This activity contributes to one of the APP aims (Objective 5), to close the unexplained gaps in progression that correlate with disadvantaged backgrounds.

Previous evaluation

Thrive mentoring was last evaluated at the end of the academic year 2022/23 using the research questions listed below, which were worded slightly differently to the current evaluation, and using a 9-point Likert scale. The scale was from 1-9, from 'Not well developed' to 'Well developed'.

The previous results showed Thrive increased self-reported career confidence, both career direction and knowledge, and self-reported professional networks too. Based on this data we did not make changes to the programme in relation to career confidence

and professional networks, and kept the same approach. It should be noted that these questions were not from validated scales and no statistical testing was done.

Changes were informed from other forms of feedback. Anecdotal feedback from students who had signed up to Thrive and not chosen a mentor, suggested some students are time-poor and unable to engage in Thrive past this point. In response to this we made our messaging clearer around meeting with a mentor for 1 hour per month, and we opened to finalists from September to accommodate students with less time. Tailored campaigns were also introduced to recommend relevant mentors to students, in an effort to help students that may not have the time to look through the mentor database.

In 2022-2023, 136 IMD Q1 and Q2 students signed up for Thrive (693 total student sign ups), of these 85 (62.5%) went on to be trained (438 total students trained), 35 matched (41% of trained IMD Q1 and Q2 students) (180 total students matched), and 34 engaged in a partnership (167 total partnerships), this was only 20.86% of the total students who had a partnership. This informed a different approach to mentor recruitment to increase IMD student engagement, by recruiting mentors from areas where we see high numbers of IMD students at the university.

Please note, data is not available on the number of new mentors joining for 2023-2024, however this information is now collected so will be included in future reports.

Methodology

Research questions

- 1) Does participation in Thrive mentoring increase self-reported confidence, as measured by surveys before and after the activities?
 - a. Overall
 - b. For IMD Q1 & Q2 students specifically
- 2) Does participation in Thrive mentoring increase self-reported professional networks, as measured by surveys before and after the activities?
 - a. Overall
 - b. For IMD Q1 & Q2 students specifically
- 3) Does taking part in Thrive mentoring increase positive Graduate Outcomes, compared to those who did not take part?
 - a. Overall
 - b. For IMD Q1 & Q2 students specifically

Participants

There were 262 unique mentoring matches and 253 unique mentoring partnerships (having at least one meeting) in the academic year 2023/24. 252 students signed up and attended the compulsory training session but never matched with a mentor, of these 26.16% were students in IMD Q1 and Q2. This suggests a gap where disadvantaged students are signing up but not progressing. Of the 253 students who had a partnership, 22.13% were from IMDQ1 and Q2. This is slightly below the undergraduate proportion of 25%. Our aim is to increase the proportion taking part in Thrive to be at least in line with this. From 2022/23, this has increased marginally by 1.27%. When comparing the IMD Q1 and Q2 students who participated in 2022/23, 2023/24 saw an increase of 30.1% in sign-ups, of these 128 (72.3%) were trained, with an increase of 9.8% compared to 22/23.

The students self-selected to take part in Thrive; student sign up is advertised to all part 2 undergraduates and finalists through a range of channels. Participants included within this report are those that engaged in an active mentoring partnership (having at least one meeting) and completed both the before **and** after surveys; a total of 117 students out of the 253 partnership participants, with 19% of survey completions from IMD Q1 and Q2 students.

Students in their first year could sign up as early birds as early as April, then receive their training in summer, gaining two weeks early access to mentor matching before other students in September. In 2023-2024, 332 students signed up for early bird, 253 of these were trained, 38% of which remained unmatched. 24.7% of early bird sign ups were IMD Q1 and Q2 students, with 47.5% of these going on to be matched.

This suggests a large percentage of early bird students, especially those who are IMD Q1 and Q2, disengage with the scheme by the time they start their second year.

Data collection

<u>Surveys</u>

Students were sent a survey after training which was mandatory in order to view available mentors and start a partnership. The majority of these were completed between August and November, when sign ups were at their peak. A similar survey was sent to all students who had a partnership, after their mentoring partnership ended, the majority of surveys being completed between June and August. The questions were asked on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale was 1-5, from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree'.

In future years, we will have more specific data around when the survey was completed due to a change in forms.

The concepts measured were:

Concept	Items
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Self-reported confidence	I am confident in my capacity to realise my graduate goals	
	I have or can develop skills to succeed in the job or course I am aiming for in future	
Self-reported career confidence	I am clear about my career direction I have strong sector, job and organisational knowledge	
Self-reported professional networks	I have contacts who can help me reach my future goals	
	I would ask for help with career decision and job search issues from others (networking)	

These questions were sourced or adapted from the NERUPI question bank.

Graduate destinations

Graduate destinations are measured by the Graduate Outcomes Survey, which is sent to students 15 months after graduation. This is not currently available for the 2023/2024 Thrive cohort – we will be able to start collecting this data once the 2023/2024 Thrive participants finish their course (and receive the survey 15 months later). Note this will not be available for all participants immediately as some students will finish their course later than others (i.e. for Part 2 students who took part in 2023/2024 we would get Graduate Outcomes in 2026, whereas a Final Year student who took part in 2023/2024 would be towards the end of 2025).

We will follow the <u>Office for Students guidance</u> on the categorisation of positive destinations which is calculated using several questions from the Graduate Outcomes Survey.

Graduates will be linked to their Thrive participation via their student number.

Ethics and Data Security

All participants were over 18 and were therefore able to give consent to take part in the research. Participants were informed of how their data would be used, including for anonymous reporting for scheme funders (APP).

Data analysis

Survey results were analysed using Paired T tests, to ascertain whether average preactivity scores differed significantly from post-activity scores. Effect sizes were also calculated.

Once we have the Graduate Outcomes data we will be able to compare the proportion of Thrive students reporting a 'positive' graduate destination with the proportion of the non-Thrive comparator group reporting a 'positive' graduate destination. Ideally the non-

Thrive comparator group will be matched on key demographics to control for the impact of this.

Type of evaluation

This evaluation was conducted to Type 2, according to the Office for Students' Standard of Evidence classification. The intermediate outcomes were measured pre- and post-activity, with the same participants.

The long-term outcome will be measured and analysed against a comparator group comprising similar students who did not participate in Thrive. We will only be able to do this once the Graduate Outcomes survey is sent out – this is sent to students 15 months after they graduate so we do not yet have any data for 2023/2024 participants.

Limitations

The nature of the evaluation type means that causal inferences cannot be made from any results – there may have been other factors influencing the students. As with many evaluations of activities in the complex landscape of higher education, it can be challenging to link activities directly to causes.

Some students who completed Thrive did not complete both surveys, meaning some potential data was lost.

As with all self-reported data, there is the risk that participants report what they think the researchers want to know, rather than how they really feel. Additionally, there was no follow-up, so we cannot be sure that positive effects continued after Thrive, although ideally the longer term Graduate Outcomes data will illuminate this.

Results

The mean scores, statistical significance test and effect sizes are shown below.

The below table analyses the before and after Thrive survey results from all UKdomiciled students who are paying home fees and participated in Thrive. 92 participants.

UK HOME UG STUDENTS	'Before'	'After'	Statistical test	Effect size
	Mean (SD)	Mean (<i>SD</i>)		
Confidence	3.88 (<i>0.63</i>)	4.2 (0.70)	t (91) = -3.74, <i>p</i> <.001 **	<i>d</i> = 0.5
I have contacts who can help me reach my future goals	2.63 (<i>1.03</i>)	3.61 (<i>1.07</i>)	t (91) = -7.79, <i>p</i> <.001 **	<i>d</i> = 0.94

* = significance at 0.05, ** = significance at 0.001

The below table analyses the before and after Thrive survey results from all UKdomiciled students in IMD quintile 1 or 2, and participated in Thrive. 22 participants.

IMD Q1+2 STUDENTS	'Before'	'After'	Statistical test	Effect size
	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Mean (<i>SD</i>)		
Confidence	3.73 (0.72)	4.14 (0.92)	t (21) = -1.64, <i>p</i> = 0.12	d = 0.57
I have contacts who can help me reach my future goals	2.36 (<i>0.88</i>)	3.64 (<i>1.07</i>)	t (21) = -5.14, <i>p</i> <.001 **	<i>d</i> = 1.44

* = significance at 0.05, ** = significance at 0.001

These tables show that mean responses were higher for each question in the 'After' survey than the 'Before' survey. The first table shows all UK Home UG students who completed the surveys, and the second table shows all IMD Q1 and Q2 students. The effect size ranges from medium (0.5) to high (0.8 or higher). The mean from before to after shows an improvement in confidence and contacts across the board, with a larger increase seen in IMD Q1 and Q2 students. The results are statistically significant at the 5% level for all questions, except for confidence in IMD Q1 and Q2 students. In future years we will combine several years of data to increase sample size which may facilitate the detection of a significant result. Together, the data suggests that Thrive is having a positive impact on each of these factors, although the association is not causal.

Additional questions:

As part of the surveys we also asked students the following:

ALL STUDENTS	'Before'	'After'	Statistical test	Effect size
	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Mean (<i>SD</i>)		
I am clear about my career direction	3.13 (<i>0.99</i>)	3.83 (<i>0.98</i>)	t (116) = -6.70, <i>p</i> <.01**	<i>d</i> = 0.71
I have strong sector, job and organisational knowledge	2.95 (<i>0.97</i>)	3.85 (<i>0.88</i>)	t (116) = -9.67, <i>p</i> <.01 **	<i>d</i> = 0.93
I would ask for help with career decision and job search issues from others	4.09 (<i>0.83</i>)	4.12 (<i>0.80</i>)	t (116) = 0.40, <i>p</i> >0.05	<i>d</i> = 0.04

Note that these were not included in the main analysis, but will be combined to form a new concept in future evaluations. The top two areas saw an increase from 'Before' to 'After' Thrive, with a medium to large effect size, however the networking response produced a very small effect size. Considering all other areas showed an improvement, this suggests potentially the question may be phrased in a way that is not easily understandable. This will be reviewed in future.

One additional question in both the pre and post surveys asked whether students knew what type of career/job role/sector they hoped to secure after graduation. The sample size was 117 and we compared the data of the 117 students who completed both surveys. In the pre-survey, 73.5% answered 'Yes', while in the post-survey, this rose to 76%, although only a slight 2.5% increase, it is moving in the right direction. In future, we may make this question in line with the answer options for the other questions, from strongly disagree to strongly agree, to be able to improve analysis.

Finally, we also asked the participants about their experience, with a sample size of 117. The questions below do not feature in the Before, and were only asked in the After survey. They are worth reporting on as they further demonstrate the positive impact Thrive has on all students who participate.

These questions were only asked in the after survey and for all students regardless of status. The results showed that 98% found their mentor approachable, 97% would recommend Thrive to other eligible students, 93% agreed the time commitment fit in well with their other commitments, 91% were comfortable interacting with their mentor, and 90% were satisfied with their partnership. These statistics suggest Thrive works well for the students who participate and they find it a rewarding experience.

19% of students who completed the after survey needed extra support during their mentoring journey, with 91% of these agreeing they felt satisfied with the support received.

We also asked an open question around how many times mentees interacted with their mentors, however this received such varying data that it was difficult to quantify. In future, we will add pre-made answers to this to gain more insight.

Conclusions & recommendations

Conclusions

The Thrive mentoring scheme appears to have a positive impact on self-reported confidence and professional networks for all students, and for IMD Q1 and 2 students specifically, although the impact on confidence for IMDQ1 and Q2 students is less secure, potentially due to a low sample size.

Recommendations

Thrive is running well with evidence suggesting it is positively impacting career confidence and professional networks, though confidence was not significantly increased for IMDQ1 and Q2 students. Overall, according to our theory of change, Thrive may help to reduce and remove barriers and progression gaps for disadvantaged students. The Graduate Outcomes data will be pivotal in tracking whether these changes in intermediate outcomes do lead to significantly better career outcomes. The evidence throughout this report supports the continuation of the programme, with potential improvements to increase IMDQ1 and Q2 student engagement, to further develop their confidence and reduce progression gaps.

For future evaluations, we will investigate using the Careers Registration Data we receive each year to act as an After survey for those students who do not complete the After survey for Thrive specifically. This is because they will answer questions that include the ones used for the report to ensure we have a larger sample size for more accurate reporting on data.

We will investigate the option of opening Thrive up to more students earlier in the year if engagement is low, to ensure all students who need it can access career mentoring and improve their confidence and networking skills.

We will continue with a personal approach to both mentees and mentors, offering further individual support to students who may not otherwise engage due to a lack of confidence or specific needs. We acknowledge that every student is different and as such we hope to trial drop in appointments for those on Thrive and individual support in choosing a mentor. We have received feedback from both mentors and mentees that the platform used isn't accessible and can be difficult to navigate, which may lead to a reduction in engagement from sign up through to matching and having a successful partnership.

Early bird receives lots of sign ups from first years, however after summer break many then disengage. We will trial replacing the current early bird scheme with a new priority access scheme for only IMDQ1+2 and Widening Participation students, with quicker turnaround between signing up and matching. This will look as follows:

- Targeted emails to eligible students in May
- Training in June
- Matching in July
- All other students will receive access in September

Based on the data in this report, we need to focus on increasing the percentage of IMD Q1 and Q2 students who go from being trained through to having a match. We will do this by investigating opportunities to provide more support to students who would benefit from a more personalised approach, potentially meeting with them and recommending mentors for them. It would also be worth researching what other universities offer in terms of providing support to IMD Q1 and Q2 students, to encourage engagement and enhance their experience.

Now that the team has recently changed and also manages the <u>RED Awards</u>, there is scope for joint promotion if Thrive opens to more student types at the same time each year. This could potentially increase the number of students who engage in Thrive that may not have engaged beforehand. This will be investigated over the next year to see what else we can do to help make Thrive a simpler process for all.

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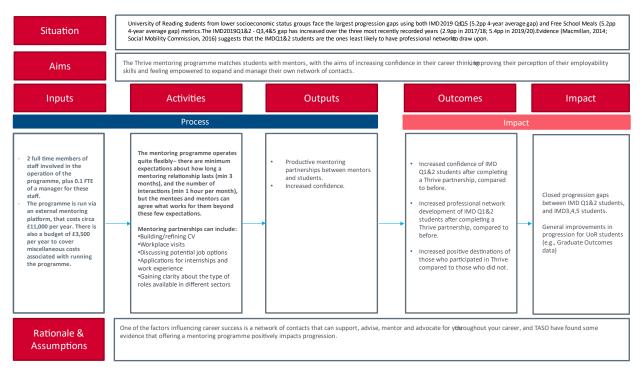
Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the students who completed the surveys and took part in this research. We would also like to thank the mentors who volunteer their time to support our students.

Notes

This report has been reviewed by members of the Access and Participation Evaluation Subcommittee (APES), with particular support from Lydia Fletcher and Louise Thomas-Burt on data analysis in an earlier version.

Appendix A – Theory of Change



Appendix B – Surveys

1. Before Survey

- 1.1. I am confident in my capacity to realise my graduate goals
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
- 1.2. I have or can develop skills to succeed in the job or course I am aiming for in the future
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
- 1.3. I have contacts who can help me reach my future goals
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree

- 1.4. I am clear about my career direction
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
- 1.5. I have strong sector, job and organisational knowledge
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
- 1.6. I would ask for help with career decision and job search issues from others (networking)
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
- 1.7. Do you know what type of career/job role/sector you are hoping to secure after graduation?
 - Yes
 - No
 - 1.7..1. If yes, please provide further detail below.

2. After Survey

- 2.1. How many times did you have a significant interaction with your mentor? (For example, multiple emails back and forth, online video call/phone call, in-person meetings)
- 2.2. How many of these interactions were face to face (e.g. in person or via Microsoft Teams, Zoom, PushFar video link or similar)?
- 2.3. Overall, how comfortable did you feel when interacting with your mentor match?
 - Very comfortable
 - Somewhat comfortable
 - Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable
 - Somewhat uncomfortable
 - Very uncomfortable
- 2.4. Overall, how engaged were you as a pair?
 - Very engaged
 - Somewhat engaged
 - Neither engaged nor disengaged
 - Somewhat disengaged
 - Very disengaged

2.5. Overall, how satisfied were you with your mentoring partnership?

- Very satisfied
- Somewhat satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Very dissatisfied
- 2.6. Did you feel your mentor was approachable and easy to speak with?
 - Yes
 - No
- 2.7. Of the following experiences, which did you secure either directly through your mentor or one of their contacts, or came about at least partly because of the positive influence of mentoring?
 - A discussion about a specific piece of graduate level work/project
 - A visit to a workplace/a workplace tour
 - Work shadowing (observing someone in graduate level work)
 - Work experience/internship (undertaking/have secured graduate level work for a few days/weeks)
 - Being offered a placement (typically 6 12 month placement)
 - Being offered a permanent graduate level job after graduation
 - Application support
 - Support with interview preparation
 - Increased insights into an industry
 - Support with developing my skills (e.g. communication skills, written skills, presentation skills)
 - Working together to find further opportunities (for example, finding internships, placements, part time work etc.).
 - I didn't experience any of these
 - Other free text
- 2.8. Please provide any further details so we get a fuller picture of the opportunities you experienced.
- 2.9. Did you establish any specific goals or activities that you wanted to achieve through mentoring?
 - Yes
 - No
 - 2.9..1. If yes, did you feel you achieved most of what you set out to do?
 - Yes
 - No
 - 2.9..1. If you'd like to add any further detail, please feel free to do so here.
 - 2.9..2. If no, tell us why you feel you didn't achieve what you set out to do?
- 2.10. Did you feel the time you committed to Thrive each month, fitted in well with your university and personal schedule?
 - Yes
 - No

- 2.11. I am confident in my capacity to realise my graduate goals
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
- 2.12. I have or can develop skills to succeed in the job or course I am aiming for in the future
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
- 2.13. I have contacts who can help me reach my future goals
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
- 2.14. I am clear about my career direction
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
- 2.15. I have strong sector, job and organisational knowledge
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
- 2.16. I would ask for help with career decision and job search issues from others (networking)
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
- 2.17. Do you know what type of career/job role/sector you are hoping to secure after graduation?
 - Yes

• No

2.17..1. If yes, please provide further detail below.

2.18. Have you needed extra support to engage in career mentoring this year?

- Yes
- No

2.18..1. If yes, did you feel satisfied with the support you received from the team?

- Yes
- No

2.18..1. If no, please explain why you didn't feel satisfied with the support you received.

- 2.19. Would you recommend becoming a Thrive mentee to other eligible students?
 - Yes
 - No