Mentoring Works: 30 years across an invisible border



ELBA Impact Practice

BIG ALLIANCE

Presence, Engagement, Change – a snapshot

30

years

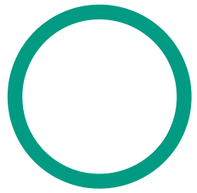
8,000+

young people mentored

5,500+

volunteer business mentors

100%



of surveyed mentees feel more confident speaking to professionals

97%



of surveyed mentees said professional careers[1] now feel achievable

91%



of surveyed mentors reported a positive impact on their own lives

83%



of surveyed mentors better understand the challenges facing young Londoners

Programme totals are estimates across 1996–2026. Survey figures are from the 2026 evaluation. The survey is one of six sources in this evaluation: in-depth interviews, the programme's annual reports from 2013 to 2026, and archival case studies support the same findings.

1. Professional careers: managerial and professional jobs, as classified by the ONS, such as those mentees saw in finance, law and business, reached via university or apprenticeships.

What is Mentoring Works?

Established in 1996 by ELBA (East London Business Alliance), Mentoring Works is a programme that matches year 10 and sixth-form students from east and north London schools with trained and DBS checked volunteer business mentors from ELBA corporate firms in the City and Canary Wharf. Students travel to their mentor's workplace every fortnight over five to eight months - building skills, confidence and plans, one conversation at a time. Hundreds of young people and mentors take part every year; over three decades the programme has supported 8,000+ young people and engaged 5,500+ volunteer mentors.

1996

Founded as the Hackney Schools Mentoring Programme

2002

Close collaboration with Hackney Learning Trust, who took responsibility for the borough's education

2000s

School partnerships increase. Handwritten applications in brown envelopes; students cross into the City on bus tokens

2008

Programme weathers the financial crisis

2010s

Name change to Mentoring Works. Expands with BIG Alliance into Islington - 1,000+ students mentored there since

2020

Adopts the national Skills Builder Framework (the programme now holds Skills Builder Impact Level 4)

2020/21

COVID cuts the programme year short and forces delivery online; then the programme deliberately returns in person

2026

Hundreds of young people and mentors every year; mentees from seven or more boroughs across east and north London

Why it matters for young people

AN INVISIBLE BORDER

Some London teenagers can see the towers of the City from their bedroom windows yet would never otherwise enter them. The boroughs that Mentoring Works serves co-exist alongside the Square Mile and Canary Wharf yet contain some of the country's most concentrated child poverty.

Research shows opportunity travels through networks: young people with multiple employer encounters at school are far less likely to end up NEET, and their chances of earning more as adults increase. Mentoring Works exists to build exactly those connections - 39% of surveyed mentees were eligible for Free School Meals; just 4% of surveyed mentors were. The programme serves as a bridge between two worlds, bringing them together to make a lasting difference.

"The amount of times where I've had students say to me, 'Are we still in London, Miss?' when we step out of the bus... the Square Mile is on our doorstep, it's walking distance."

- Teacher, partner school since 2003

100% of surveyed mentees said the programme made them more confident speaking to professionals and adults, with two-thirds agreeing strongly

97% of surveyed mentees said professional careers[2] now feel achievable

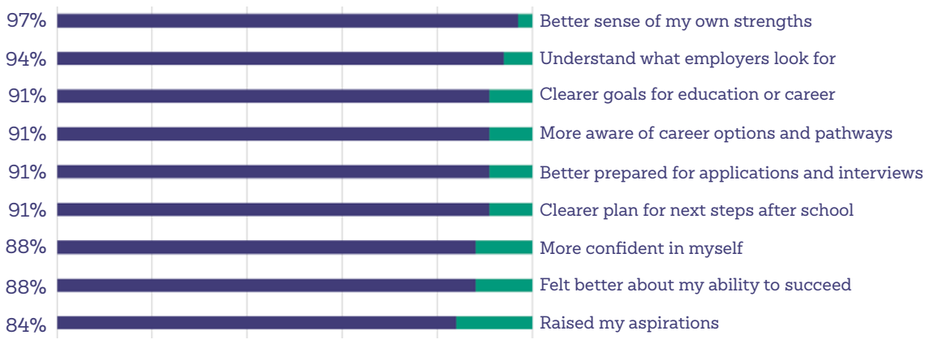
94% of surveyed mentees rated their experience Excellent or Good

94% of surveyed mentees said visiting their mentor's workplace gave them a realistic understanding of professional environments

88% of surveyed mentees made at least one concrete decision because of the programme

GRAPH 1

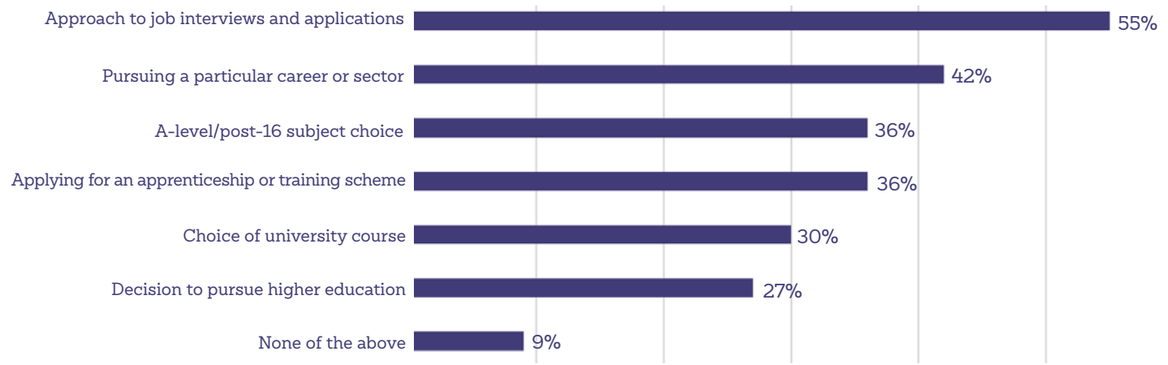
'As a result of the programme...' mentees agreeing or strongly agreeing



2. Professional careers: managerial and professional jobs, as classified by the ONS, such as those mentees saw in finance, law and business, reached via university or apprenticeships.

GRAPH 2

Decisions the mentees say the programme influenced



THREE LAYERS OF A VEIL

What does a workplace visit actually change? Mentees across three decades describe the same lifting of a veil, layer by layer:

1st

The building: 'it looked so much more inviting... than the stereotype I knew from TV shows.'

2nd

Then the culture: 'my mentor taught me how to thrive in professional environments.'

3rd

Then the institution itself: 'I used to think big global banks are really complicated... now I can understand how banks work.'

A world that was foreign territory becomes somewhere they can belong.

"Before having a mentor, I wasn't the best at speaking with people... After all of the mentoring, I feel like I can walk into a room and communicate with people effectively."

- Sixth-form mentee

"He was very shy and reserved and that started to open up... At the end of year 10 he gave a talk to the whole year and got top marks... he'd been voted most improved student ... he said he couldn't do that if it hadn't been for the programme."

- Mentor, global financial services firm

"It lets you live the experience before you're actually there... I think it would be a huge loss to not take it."

- Year 10 mentee, message to future participants

Why it matters for mentors

A TWO-WAY STREET

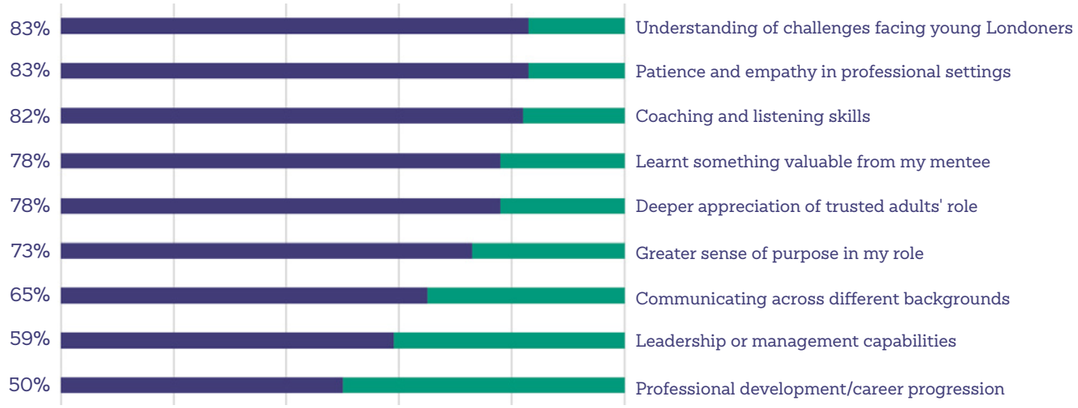
Mentoring changes the mentors too. 91% say it had a positive impact on their own lives; more than three-quarters say they learnt something valuable from their mentee. And the statistic that explains why they volunteer: 91% of mentors never had a mentor of their own growing up. The people who never had this are the ones providing it.

"I have two ears and one mouth, and I'm learning to use them to that ratio."

- Mentor, global financial services firm, on what mentoring taught him

GRAPH 3

What mentors say they gained



A 30-YEAR-OLD ANSWER TO A 2025 NATIONAL STRATEGY

The Government's *Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy* (2025) calls for 500,000 more young people to have access to a trusted adult outside their home by 2035. Mentoring Works has been building exactly those relationships since 1996 - and delivering the employer encounters and workplace experiences England's Gatsby Career Benchmarks now require, two decades before they existed.

87% of surveyed mentors say private sector investment in mentoring is essential or very important to that national goal - and none dismissed it.

GRAPH 4

How important is private-sector investment in mentoring young people? Mentors' views



Looking ahead – the next 30 years

The strongest signal in the whole evaluation is demand for more. A majority of mentees who finished the programme said they would have loved to stay connected*; mentors ask to hear how their mentees get on; one mentor summed up the endings in six words: 'collective sadness when the programme ended.'

The programme's next chapter aims to meet that demand - within the safeguarding rules that keep the programme trustworthy:

- Pilot an opt-in alumni LinkedIn group for former mentees once they turn 18.
- Work with partner firms to open up work experience, apprenticeship and internship opportunities.
- Grow the programme with new and existing partners - more mentors, more schools, more boroughs.

30 years ago, some London teenagers could see the City from their bedroom windows and would never enter it.

The towers are still visible. The programme still runs. And the young people who cross that invisible border with a mentor beside them arrive somewhere the view alone would never have taken them.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This 30-year impact evaluation of Mentoring Works was conducted between April and August 2026 by Dr Carmen Nicoara, Head of Research and Impact at ELBA and BIG Alliance, and Founder and Lead of ELBA's Impact Practice. It draws on a mixed-methods design: surveys of 33 mentees and 23 mentors; 14 in-depth interviews spanning mentors, mentees, programme managers past and present, and a teacher involved since 2003; written mentee reflections; archival case studies written by the programme team around 2010; the programme's own annual end-of-programme reports from 2013 to 2026; and published partner sources - triangulated across six vantage points and three decades.

The Impact Practice is ELBA's dedicated impact evaluation division delivering independent, rigorous impact evaluation for businesses seeking evidence about their community investment, social value and impact programmes - whether scaling, restructuring, launching or deepening.

*A note on staying in touch: Mentoring Works follows clear safeguarding rules on contact between mentors and young people, including after the programme ends. These rules protect young people, and they are one of the main reasons many mentees did not keep in touch with their mentors. The wish to stay connected reflects how strong these relationships become.

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