

MENTORING AND COACHING FOR  
TEACHERS IN THE FURTHER EDUCATION  
AND SKILLS SECTOR IN ENGLAND

SUMMARY REPORT

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## INTRODUCTION

This brief report summarises the key findings of research that sought to provide a comprehensive account of existing, institution-based mentoring for teachers in the Further Education and Skills (FE) sector, while also exploring the potential for introducing an external mentor support programme.

Through this research we sought to:

- Examine the reach, strengths and limitations of institution-based teacher mentoring in the FE sector in England, with a particular but not exclusive focus on teachers of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).
- Explore the potential need for and appropriateness of external mentor support for FE teachers in general and teachers of STEM subjects in particular.
- Identify factors which may encourage or discourage FE teachers of STEM and other subjects from accessing and taking full advantage of external and/or institution-based mentoring, and identify other barriers to effective mentoring and potential means of overcoming these.
- Make recommendations with respect to strengthening institution-based mentoring and/or introducing a programme of external mentor support for FE teachers.

The overriding aim of the study was to inform the design and implementation of a programme for enhancing institution-based mentoring and/or providing external mentor support, which would add value to existing mechanisms for initial teacher training (ITT) and professional learning and development (PLD), and thus enhance teachers' subject knowledge, subject pedagogy, and effectiveness, wellbeing and retention.

We define mentoring, whether it is undertaken by someone in the teacher's institution or by an 'external mentor', as:

*A one to one relationship between a relatively inexperienced teacher (the mentee) and a relatively experienced teacher (the mentor), which aims to support the mentee's: (a) learning and development as a teacher; (b) wellbeing; and (c) integration into and acceptance by the cultures of both the organisation in which they are employed and the wider profession.*

(Adapted from Hobson and Malderez, 2013, p.90.)

Mentoring is conceptualised as a developmental activity in which mentors may adopt a range of supportive roles to empower mentees and support their PLD and wellbeing (Hobson and Malderez, 2013). One such mentor role is *coaching*, which relates to attempts to support an individual's development of one or more job-specific skills or capabilities (Malderez and Bodoczky, 1999). We thus see mentoring as a broader concept and PLD activity than coaching, and so references to 'mentoring' in this report encompass coaching, or at least the possibility that coaching may take place within any particular mentoring relationship.

In this summary report we first briefly outline the research undertaken, then present key findings, and conclude by offering a number of recommendations for policy and practice. Further information and evidence relating to the points made in this summary report can be found in our full research report.<sup>1</sup>

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The research employed a sequential mixed method design (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998), comprising three main elements:

- an initial review of literature<sup>2</sup>; which informed:
- semi-structured interviews with teachers, mentors and a range of other stakeholders associated with the teaching of STEM and other subjects in the FE and Skills sector; and
- an online survey of teachers of all subjects/vocational areas in the sector:

Interview participants were recruited, using snowball sampling, from a range of institutions, including FE colleges, sixth-form colleges, adult and community learning providers, employment and learning providers, and universities. In total, 40 participants drawn from 19 different institutions across England were involved in this strand of the research. They comprised:

- 8 mentors of beginning and/or more experienced STEM teachers;
- 8 beginning teachers of STEM subjects who had current or recent experience of being mentored;
- 4 other experienced STEM teachers who had previously been mentored and might be potential beneficiaries of external mentoring;
- 5 heads or assistant heads of department or faculty (STEM subjects);
- 4 FE-based teacher educators, including heads of teacher education and/or CPD (all subjects);
- 3 other senior leaders in FE, who had knowledge of mentoring and the capacity of the provider to support this (all subjects);
- 8 HEI colleagues with knowledge of teacher education and mentoring for the FE sector in relation to STEM subjects and/or more broadly;
- 3 senior colleagues with experience of leading, coordinating or providing programmes of external mentor support for secondary teachers of STEM subjects, or similar programmes in the FE sector.<sup>3</sup>

An invitation for teachers to complete the online survey was also distributed via a range of different regional and national networks, and also utilised snowball sampling. The platform used to host the survey was Bristol online surveys ([www.surveybris.ac.uk/](http://www.surveybris.ac.uk/)). In total 392 usable responses were received to the survey, from teachers based in FE colleges, sixth-form colleges, and other adult and

1 Hobson, A.J., Maxwell, B., Stevens, A., Doyle, K. and Malderez, A. (2015) *Mentoring and coaching for teachers in the Further Education and Skills sector in England: Full report*, available from [www.gatsby.org.uk](http://www.gatsby.org.uk).

2 A detailed account of our review of literature is provided in Chapter 2 of the full report of this project.

3 The numbers provided here for the different categories of participant sum to more than 40 because some participants occupied more than one role (e.g. head of department and mentor).

community and employment and learning providers. Responses were received from across the regions of England: the North East; North West; Yorkshire and the Humber; East Midlands; West Midlands; East of England; London; South East; and South West.

## KEY FINDINGS

### TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORT FOR THEIR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Perhaps unsurprisingly we found variation in teachers' perceptions of the support they receive for their PLD, with some teachers perceiving that they receive appropriate and adequate support and others not. On the positive side, some of our teacher interviewees stated that they benefited from:

- having colleagues who offered support, were approachable and responded positively to requests for support;
- having opportunities to collaborate and network with other teachers;
- being supported to attend external courses or 'CPD' (opportunities for continuing professional development).

On the other hand, some participants bemoaned what they considered to be insufficient support for their PLD and wellbeing, referring – for example – to:

- the lack of a thorough programme of induction for teachers new to their institution;
- a lack of subject-specific support;
- institutions not responding favourably to requests to attend training courses;
- feeling that they were left to 'sink or swim';
- a lack of explicit discussion about pedagogy in their organisations;
- a feeling that their senior leadership teams were too preoccupied with, and put too great a resource into, the assessment of teachers' 'performance', at the expense of a genuine concern for and investment in their PLD.

From the analysis of our interview data, it emerged that the most frequently mentioned PLD needs of STEM teachers related to:

- their ability to effectively employ a range of teaching methods – 'general pedagogical knowledge';
- their pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) (Shulman, 1987).

These findings are fairly consistent with the responses to our survey question, which asked teachers to indicate those areas where they might benefit from additional training or support for their professional development. Here, the most frequently given responses (from teachers across all subjects/vocational areas) were:

- differentiating teaching for different learners (40% of respondents);
- the ability to use a range of teaching methods (35%).

The full list of survey responses is provided below in Table 1.

**Table 1: What would you say are the areas, if any, in which you think you would benefit from additional training, professional development or support in the next 12 months?**

Differentiating my teaching for different learners	40%
Ability to use a range of teaching methods	35%
Awareness of research findings about effective teaching methods	25%
Ability to work with gifted/talented students	23%
Knowledge/understanding of contemporary industry techniques/practices	21%
Ability to work with students with special educational needs (SEN)/inclusion	21%
Ability to deal with students' personal issues	20%
Knowledge/understanding of awarding body requirements	19%
Ability to maintain discipline amongst students	19%
Awareness of labour market information and employer requirements	19%
Knowledge/understanding of student motivation and behaviour	18%
Using ICT in subject/vocational teaching	17%
Ability to work with students with English as an Additional Language (EAL)	16%
Teaching A-level	14%
Support for my subject/vocational knowledge	13%
Marking and/or assessing competence	12%
Developing my confidence as a teacher, generally	12%
Knowledge/understanding of the principles of assessment for learning	12%
Leading subject/vocational team	12%
Knowledge/understanding of education and/or training policy	12%
Staff supervision/management skills	11%
Teaching literacy/numeracy skills	10%
Planning/organising	9%
Teaching vocational courses at Level 3	9%
Time management skills	8%
Teaching courses at Level 4/5/6	6%
Teaching GCSE	6%
Teaching 14-16 year olds	5%
Teaching courses at Entry Level or Level 1	4%
Teaching vocational courses at Level 2	4%
Other	6%
None	5%
Don't know	3%

Total n = 382



An important consideration that can enhance or impede teachers' PLD is the extent to which individual teachers are willing and able to acknowledge and discuss their perceived limitations (for example, in their subject/vocational knowledge or pedagogy) and PLD needs (Hobson and McIntyre, 2013). Our interview data suggest that some teachers are able to acknowledge and openly discuss their PLD needs with some colleagues within their institutions, while others are less able to do so<sup>4</sup>, as illustrated by the following quotations:

*There would be things [that] ... I was perhaps a little bit embarrassed ... to ask my line manager ... I don't want to look incompetent, particularly as a new member of staff. I mean I'm not that shy, but when you're new to somewhere you don't want to look "Gosh, have they hired somebody who's incapable?" So to be able to quickly pick up the phone and grab ... my mentor and say "Gosh, what's going on here? How do I log into ...?" something that was perhaps online that's a system I should know was absolutely invaluable. (FE sector teacher discussing experience of induction mentoring)*

*I think it absolutely depends on the individuals involved ... Some people just don't want to tell you or talk to people and they have a very suspicious view of any organisation frankly regardless of how benign. Other people even in the throes of say a restructure or redundancies are perfectly capable of coming forward. (FE-based teacher educator)*

A number of factors encourage or impede teachers' ability and willingness to openly discuss their PLD needs, including the culture of the organisation and the potential (or otherwise) for developing safe, trusting relationships with mentors, line managers and others.

## THE NATURE OF INSTITUTION-BASED MENTORING AND COACHING

Just over one-third of survey respondents (teachers of varying degrees of experience) indicated that they currently have – or in the last two years have had – a mentor in the institution within which they were employed. Our survey data suggest that:

- nearly all teachers working towards an ITT qualification have an institution-based mentor<sup>5</sup>, compared with around 25-30% of those who are not working towards an ITT qualification or who have previously successfully obtained one.

Our interview data reveal that:

- many providers also allocate mentors to those who are new to teaching in their institution, as part of a broader programme of induction support;
- many providers also allocate mentors or coaches (often referred to as *Teaching and Learning Coaches*, *Teaching and Learning Mentors*, or *Subject Learning Coaches*) to teachers of varying degrees of experience whose teaching is judged (via Ofsted inspections or the institution's own quality assurance mechanisms) to be Ofsted Grade 3 ('requires improvement') or 4 ('inadequate'), as opposed to 1 ('outstanding') or 2 ('good').

4 Slightly over half of our interviewees indicated that they – or teachers they were supporting or were familiar with – were able to discuss their PLD openly with at least some colleagues within their institution, though given the complex nature of the phenomenon in question we cannot be confident about relative proportions of teachers who are able to do so.

5 Twenty-three out of the 25 survey respondents who were working towards an ITT qualification stated that they had an institution-based mentor, and two indicated that they did not. Our interview data suggest that trainees were infrequently allocated mentors who were external to the institution, especially in smaller providers and others where there were no suitable same subject or vocational specialists to undertake this role.

Amongst those survey respondents who indicated that they had (or had recently had) a mentor:

- just over two-thirds (and all but one of those undertaking an ITT qualification) stated that this individual was someone working in the same subject or vocational area as themselves;
- just under half stated that their mentor was also their line manager;
- approximately a third (33%) stated that they discussed their work or development as a teacher with their mentor at least once a week, while 32% indicated that they did so less than once a month.

There was a lack of consensus amongst research participants regarding those teachers that *most needed* or would *most benefit* from mentoring, although many perceived teachers in their first four or five years in the profession to be amongst those with the greatest need.

### **BENEFITS, LIMITATIONS AND FACTORS INFLUENCING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INSTITUTION-BASED MENTORING**

The study found that while the quality of mentoring has improved to some extent across the FE sector in the last decade or so, it remains extremely variable. A wide range of impediments to effective mentoring currently exist, including:

- issues with the selection and training of mentors;
- limited time available to mentors to meet with and provide support for their mentees;
- the use of mentoring and (in particular) coaching as a remedial strategy to address the perceived under-performance of teachers.

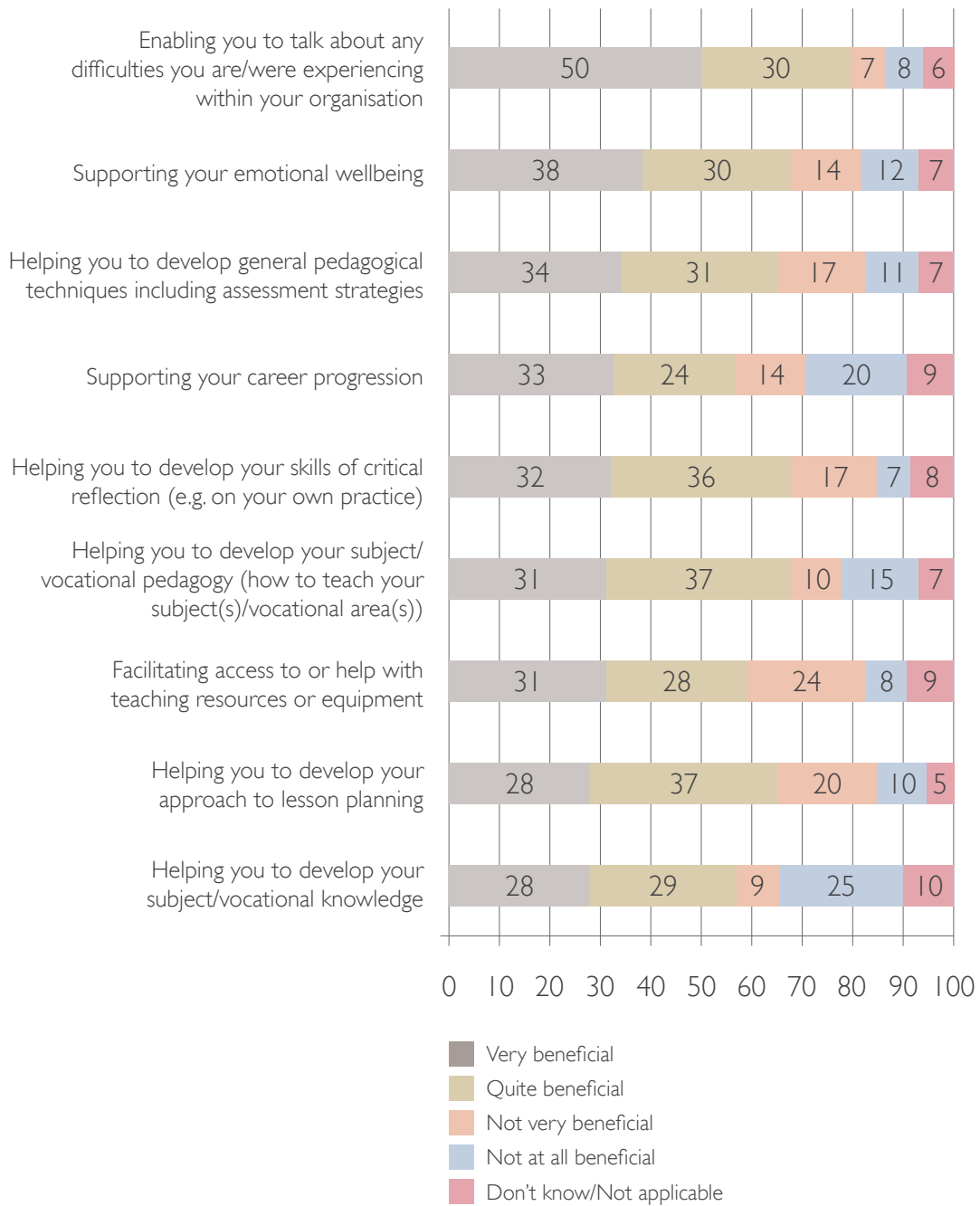
Where they are working well, mentoring and coaching can result in a range of benefits for the teachers being supported, including: enabling them to talk about various difficulties that they experience with their teaching and in the workplace; supporting their emotional wellbeing; helping them develop general pedagogical techniques; and helping develop their subject pedagogy.

Survey respondents' perceptions of the extent to which they experienced various potential benefits of mentoring are summarised in Table 2.

A number of factors were found to enhance the effectiveness and impact of institution-based mentoring including:

- having mentors who share the subject/vocational specialism of the teachers they are supporting;
- the mentor not being the line manager of the mentee;
- having a rigorous process for the selection of mentors and for pairing them with specific teachers;
- having regular and sustained contact between mentors and the teachers being supported.

**Table 2: To what extent is/was the mentoring/coaching beneficial in terms of:**



Total n range = 130-132

**THE POTENTIAL VALUE OF AND DEMAND FOR EXTERNAL MENTORS TO SUPPORT TEACHERS’ PROFESSIONAL AND LEARNING DEVELOPMENT**

Almost half (48%) of the teachers responding to the online survey indicated that they felt they might benefit from the support of an external mentor for at least one of the subjects/vocational areas they teach.<sup>6</sup>

- Slightly higher percentages of teachers who had completed between one and five years in teaching (56-57%) stated that they might benefit from the support of an external mentor; in comparison with those who had been teaching for longer:

<sup>6</sup> External mentors were defined for respondents as experienced subject/vocational specialist teachers, who do not work within the same organisation as the teachers they support, and who provide face to face or online support for teachers’ subject/vocational knowledge, subject/vocational pedagogy, or other teaching-related issues.

- However, a lower percentage of (42%) those currently working towards an ITT qualification stated that they felt they might benefit from access to an external mentor, which may be partly explained by the fact that they should already have a mentor and other forms of support as part of their ITT.
- A slightly higher percentage of teachers who *did not have an institution-based mentor* indicated that they might benefit from the support of an external mentor: amongst those who did have an institution-based mentor, a higher percentage of those whose mentor *did not* share the same subject/vocational specialism as themselves indicated that they might benefit from the support of an external mentor.<sup>7</sup>

Those survey respondents who stated that they felt they might benefit from the opportunity to access an external mentor for at least one of the subjects they taught indicated that they might wish to take advantage of such support for a variety of reasons – the most frequently stated responses being support for their subject/vocational pedagogy, for their subject/vocational content knowledge, and to gain an independent perspective on some issues. The full list of responses is summarised in Table 3.

The survey findings reported below were generally supported by our interview data, which highlighted the following potential benefits to STEM teachers of having access to an external mentor:

- gaining an independent perspective on a range of matters;
- being more able to talk about problems they were experiencing within their institutions;
- support for subject/vocational pedagogy and content knowledge – especially for those teachers who do not have access to a same subject/vocational specialist within their institution.

Interviewees also suggested that access to an external mentor might enable teachers to:

- be more likely to acknowledge and seek support for their PLD needs;
- improve their time and workload management.

Through our survey and interviews we also identified a number of factors that might discourage some teachers from taking advantage of the opportunity to access the support of an external mentor. These included:

- teachers being confident about their teaching and subject/vocational knowledge and feeling that they do not need additional support;
- teachers feeling that they are able to access all the support they need within their institutions;
- teachers feeling that they would not have sufficient time to engage with an external mentor on top of other commitments.

The survey findings in this area are summarised in Table 4.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that none of these findings are statistically significant, though the lack of statistical significance is not unexpected given the relatively small sub-samples being compared.

**Table 3: Which of the following factors might prompt you to seek the support of an external mentor/coach?**

I would welcome additional support to develop my subject/vocational area pedagogy (how to teach my subject(s)/vocational area(s))	56%
I would welcome additional support to develop my subject/vocational knowledge	54%
I would welcome an independent perspective on some issues	50%
I would welcome additional support to facilitate access to or help with teaching resources or equipment	47%
I would welcome additional support to develop general pedagogical techniques (teaching methodologies)	46%
I would welcome additional advice or guidance regarding career progression	38%
I would welcome additional support for my emotional wellbeing	25%
Lack of a subject/vocational specialist in my organisation	24%
General lack of support in my organisation	20%
Performance management and/or other issues can make it hard to talk about any difficulties within my organisation	19%
Lack of collaborative ethos in my organisation	19%
Pressure to conform to the organisation's teaching and learning models	19%
Issues with an organisation-based mentor/coach or line manager	10%
Other	10%

Total n = 221

Amongst the 'other' responses to the survey question below, and points made by our interviewees, some teachers suggested that the following additional considerations might also discourage them from seeking the support of an external mentor:

- a potential lack of geographical proximity to the mentor;
- doubts about the credibility of the external mentor, especially one who is not currently engaged in teaching;
- concerns about evaluative or judgemental mentoring – illustrated below:

*I suppose I view mentoring sometimes as somebody sitting in watching you and just making notes and that can put people off. So if say for instance I went to see a learner and I had a mentor there who was sat in a corner just writing notes you'd be like "Is he picking fault?"*

(Trainer in Employment and Learning Provider)

**Table 4: Which of the following factors might discourage you from seeking the support of an external mentor/coach?**

I am sufficiently confident about my teaching and subject/vocational knowledge	61%
I am able to access any support that I need within my organisation and/or from other sources	57%
I do not feel I would have sufficient time to engage with an external mentor/coach given my existing work and non-work based commitments	36%
It wouldn't look good to have to ask for help	5%
Other	5%

Total n = 206

### POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO ESTABLISHING AN EFFECTIVE EXTERNAL MENTOR SUPPORT PROGRAMME

There is a wide range of potential barriers to the introduction of an effective programme of external mentor support, amongst which issues relating to the following considerations were frequently mentioned by our interviewees:

- finding a sufficient number of suitable mentors in different regions;
- teachers' willingness and ability to engage with an external mentor;
- cost, sustainability and institutional buy-in.

However, potential means of overcoming such barriers include:

- establishing mentoring networks across institutions;
- involving organisations in the development of the mentoring programmes to encourage buy-in;
- ensuring sufficient opportunities for regular face-to-face contact between mentors and the teachers they are supporting;
- piloting, evaluating and demonstrating the impact of an external mentor programme;
- ring-fencing funding to support teachers' PLD in general and mentoring in particular.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the potentially significant benefits that can be derived from effective mentoring, we argue that efforts should be made at both policy and institutional levels to strengthen institution-based mentoring across the sector.

In our full report we make a number of specific recommendations. Amongst these are several aimed at policy-makers and other national organisations and stakeholders responsible for, or interested in, improving teachers' professional learning and development (and improving teacher mentoring and coaching in particular).

In addition, we make recommendations to senior leadership teams of FE colleges, sixth-form colleges, employment and learning providers, and adult and community learning providers.

### GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- In an ideal world – given the variable quality of institution-based mentoring and the difficulties many teachers experience in acknowledging and seeking support for their PLD needs within their institutions in the current climate – all teachers should have the opportunity to access an external mentor (a subject-specialist teacher who has recent experience of teaching within the sector and who is a trained mentor).
- At a *minimum*, teachers who do not have access to the support of a trained mentor with the same subject/vocational specialism within their existing institution should have the opportunity to access a same-subject trained external mentor.

**RECOMMENDATIONS  
FOR POLICY-MAKERS**

- Introduce or support the introduction of a national framework and/or qualifications for mentoring that:
  - establish a professional status for mentors that ensures FE sector providers recognise the value of this work, set expectations for mentor training and development, and allow time for mentoring activity;
  - are sufficiently flexible to be adapted to the range of contexts found in the FE sector;
  - ensure that mentoring roles, models and processes are clear.
- Take measures to ensure that all mentor training and development programmes adhere to principles that have been demonstrated to best support mentees, for example, through some kind of approval process (at least for the training of mentor trainers) and/or a register of mentor trainers.
- Make it a requirement that all mentors undertake/have undertaken appropriate training for the role – and that mentor trainers (and trainer trainers) have also been trained or have demonstrated competence in their roles.
- Support the establishment of a national register of external mentors for different subject/vocational areas.
- Reduce the emphasis on the observation, assessment and evaluation of teachers' 'performance' and increase the emphasis and importance placed on developmental support which values risk-taking, accepts that making mistakes is part of the learning process, and thus encourages teachers to openly discuss and seek to address their perceived limitations and PLD needs in a safe, trusting environment.
- Try to ensure that sufficient resource is provided – and if possible ring-fenced – to enable adequate support for teachers' PLD, and to support and invest in mentoring across the FE sector.



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAMS

- Seek to ensure that all teachers have access to the support of a same-subject/vocational specialist mentor – within and/or outside of the institution.
- Encourage and engage in collaboration with other providers to ensure the availability of trained mentors across all subject/vocational areas.
- Ensure that all teacher mentors are trained for the role, and have subsequent opportunities both to undertake refresher mentor training courses and to network with other mentors.
- Ensure that your institution has an appropriate architecture to support mentoring, which includes organisational systems and processes, and appropriate time allocations for mentoring.
- Ensure that your institution has rigorous and effective processes for the selection or appointment of mentors (based on criteria for effective mentoring) and for pairing them appropriately with specific teachers, and that mentees have an element of choice regarding whom they are mentored by.
- Ensure as far as possible that teachers are not mentored by their line managers.
- Seek to bring about change in the culture of the organisation, with a reduced emphasis on observing, assessing and evaluating teachers' 'performance', and a corresponding increased emphasis on developmental support which values risk-taking, and accepts that making mistakes is part of the learning process, all of which encourages teachers to openly discuss and seek to address their perceived limitations and PLD needs in a safe, trusting environment.
- In particular, seek to ensure that mentoring and coaching are not deployed as, or perceived to be, forms of remedial support but are rather used and seen in more positive terms as supporting the PLD and lifelong learning of all teachers and leaders.
- Ensure that sufficient resource is set aside and invested in the institutional architecture for mentoring (e.g. to meet specific recommendations laid out above, such as sufficient time for mentoring, mentor selection and training), to ensure adequate support for effective mentoring and teachers' PLD.

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