Outreach and Widening Participation

Herts and Minds Autumn School Report – 2013

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www.herts.ac.uk
1. Executive summary

The ‘Herts and Minds Autumn School’ (hereafter Autumn School) has three main aims:

1. Enhancing GCSE C/D borderline students’ confidence and knowledge by providing them with a series of intense study skill sessions in either English or Maths.

2. Raising participating students’ higher education aspirations by bringing them onto the University’s campus and giving them a view of student life by immersing them in university facilities and offering interactions with student ambassadors.

3. Creating a unique, long-term mentoring network within schools between Sixth Formers and Year 11s thereby enabling continual support as Years 11s prepare for their GCSEs.

The programme was a resounding success, boosting students’ confidence by 60% and providing them with a clear understanding of what GCSE examiners expect and how to achieve a grade C.

Furthermore, the programme successfully raised higher education aspirations, as 56% of participating students were now either likely or very likely to apply, compared with just 32% at the beginning of the event.

Sixth Form mentors were trained in mentoring skills and will provide subject-specific support to Year 11s in their schools. The mentoring will allow the knowledge developed by Year 11s during the Autumn School to be reinforced throughout the school year, while allowing mentors to gain confidence and a new set of skills.

Although students’ actual GCSE marks won’t be known for some time, Autumn School has effectively informed participating students of exam criteria and provided them with the necessary tool set to be successful over the course of this year as they prepare their GCSEs.

2. Programme objectives

What is it?

Autumn School is a three day non-residential programme taking place during the October half-term. It is aimed at Year 11 students who are on the borderline between C and D in their predicted Maths or English GCSEs. 41 students from five secondary schools listed as part of the Department’s Beacon Schools participated¹.

¹ Francis Combe Academy (Watford); Hertswood Academy Lower School (Borehamwood); Marriotts School (Stevenage); Mount Grace School (Potters Bar); St. Mary’s School (Cheshunt)
Students focused on either Maths or English and attended intensive sessions in these subjects. These were led by expert practitioners, specifically recruited by the Department for this event. General study skills workshops were also delivered. All three days took place on the University’s campus. On Day 2, students and staff also went to Thorpe Park.

Aims & desired outcomes
Autumn School’s main aims are to increase students’ confidence levels and provide them with the skills they need to achieve a C on their chosen GCSE subject. By bringing them on-campus and having them use university facilities, as well as engage with student ambassadors, we also hope to raise their aspirations with regard to higher education.

Who delivered it?
Autumn School was organised by Lindsey Rigby (Outreach Manager), coordinated and delivered by Cobi Campbell (Outreach Officer) and supported by Safina Mahmood (Outreach Assistant), as well as a number of Department staff and student ambassadors. Gil Knibbs (Mentor Coordinator) delivered the mentor training.

3. Methods
All participants were administered a pre and post programme survey, containing questions measuring their confidence levels, knowledge of GCSE content, aspirations, practitioner performance and overall satisfaction. In all, 37 respondents completed the pre-event evaluation while 39 completed the post-event survey. Most questions are comprised of Likert scales, containing five options, allowing participants’ responses to be compared before and after the event. This provides an overall view of how well the programme is fulfilling its aims.

Both surveys are fully included in Appendix 1.

Confidence & knowledge
In-line with Autumn School’s objectives, students’ academic confidence level before and after the programme was measured, as well as their knowledge of which skills they need in order to achieve a C grade.

Aspirations
In order to capture their aspirations towards higher education, students were asked the likelihood of applying to university, both before and after the Autumn School.

Practitioner performance
Participants evaluated subject practitioners on the following criteria: engagement, describing concepts and explaining how to achieve a C grade.
Satisfaction
Finally, students indicated how satisfied they were with the whole of Autumn School.

Following-up on GCSE grades
Follow-up online surveys will be sent to participating students once GCSE results have been released. Sixth Form mentors will be evaluated in a similar manner to gauge how effective they have been in supporting their mentees. These surveys will provide the final pieces to the programme’s overall evaluation.

4. Survey findings
A clear boost in confidence
Participants were asked two questions about their confidence levels before and after the Autumn School.

1. How confident are you in achieving a C grade or higher on your chosen GCSE?

Although a significant proportion (43%) of students were “confident” of achieving a C grade on their chosen GCSE subject prior to Autumn School, an equal percentage (43%) were “not sure”.

After Autumn School, the percentage of students confident in achieving that C grade was 69%—representing a 60% increase.

The percentage of unsure students plummeted to just 10%, representing a decrease of 77%.

Additionally, there was a 300% increase in the percentage of students who are now “very confident”.

The following chart (Figure 1) indicates confidence levels after Autumn School.

![Figure 1: Participants’ confidence levels in achieving a C grade](image-url)
2. **Do you feel you now have the necessary skills to improve your grades?**

There was a 57% decrease in participants who were “not sure” if they had the right skills, meaning **87%** indicated they now had the necessary skills after Autumn School.

The following graph (Figure 2) represents students’ opinions after Autumn School.

![Do you now have the right skills?](image)

*Figure 2: Participant evaluation of their own skills*

Of those were still unsure, **100%** of them knew how to “go about improving their skills”.

**Raising aspirations**

Participants were asked about their likelihood of applying to university.

*How likely are you to apply to university?*

Prior to Autumn School, the majority (49%) were unsure. There was a higher percentage of those who were either “likely” or “very likely” to apply (32%) versus those who were “not that likely” or “not likely at all” to apply (16%).

After Autumn School, the overall trend was very much towards applying to university:

- **75% increase** in those either “likely” or “very likely” to apply
- **33% decrease** in those unsure about applying
- **50% decrease** in those who were “not that likely” or “not likely at all” to apply

The following chart (Figure 3) details participants’ likelihood of applying to university after Autumn School.
Expert practitioners
Students were asked a series of questions about the performance of their subject leaders.

How engaging was Karen or Lisa?
How well did Karen or Lisa explain ideas and concepts to you?
How well did Karen or Lisa explain what you need to do on your exam to get a C grade?

The feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive:

- 87% felt the leaders were “quite” or “very” engaging
- 85% said they explained ideas and concepts “quite” or “very” well
- 90% confirmed that they explained C grade targets “quite” or “very” well

The following chart (Figure 4) indicates how well practitioners explained C grade targets.
These figures justify the resources invested in recruiting the practitioners, especially when viewed alongside participants’ overwhelmingly positive feedback, including satisfaction rates of 87% or over for ‘engagement and clear description of grade C targets’.

**Overall satisfaction**
Participants rated Autumn School extremely high—97% were either “satisfied” or “extremely satisfied”.

The following chart (Figure 5) showcases just how satisfied participants were.

![Overall satisfaction chart](image)

5. Anecdotal findings

Some of the strengths and weaknesses of Autumn School are not captured by participant evaluations. These have been collected from observations and informal discussions with staff and are recapped below:

**Unpredictable school behaviour**
The main obstacle when dealing with schools is confirming student numbers. The application process consists of two steps, with schools initially submitting a list of students they want to attend. This essentially reserves places on Autumn School for those students (capped at a maximum of 15 places per school). Schools then have several weeks to forward-on full application and consent forms. Instead of schools following up the initial stage with forms matching the names from the initial student list, they submitted new student names. In some cases, this happened a second time when different students to those submitted previously arrived on Day 1. It is clear that schools are using the first step in the application process as way to block off places in the programme and ensure their school fills as many places as possible.
The result is staff had to scramble on the morning of Day 1 of Autumn School to adjust participant lists, ensure that all students had their consent forms and re-produce event literature containing student names. It also meant that not all places on the Autumn School were filled as some schools did not send as many students as they originally indicated (9 places out of 50 went unfilled, i.e. 18%).

**Reliant on GCSE results**

As previously mentioned, the programme’s success will be partly determined by the participants’ GCSE results in their chosen subject, which won’t be known until August 2014. The Department is planning on contacting these students at that time to collect this data. As a way to maximise validity, schools re-applying to Autumn School 2014 will be asked to provide results from the previous year’s participants.

Given the timing of GCSE results and Autumn School, there is only a limited timeframe in which the Department can analyse this data and implement changes.

**Academic versus entertainment balance**

In addition to the intensive study skills workshops, participants take part in a number of activities, in which they can relax, have fun and meet other students. This includes a trip to Thorpe Park on Day 2. It’s evident that for this group of participants, such a trip is a major lure and factor for attending Autumn School. The trip is meant to provide students with a break and to reward them for their efforts and in taking time out of their half-term holidays.

The excitement that builds up around the trip can threaten to overshadow the academic focus of the programme, so, it is important for staff and practitioners to continually focus students’ attention. Although it may seem as if the Thorpe Park trip might be better placed for Day 3, the strong attendance throughout the three days shows how dedicated almost all of the students were (just two students failed to attend Day 3).

**Strong demand**

Despite only contacting schools three weeks before the programme, a total of 120 applications for 50 places were received, proving the content of the programme is very much sought after by schools.

**Building wider networks**

The Department was able to tap into several new networks, both near and further afield, as a result of its practitioner recruitment. The Maths expert is part of ‘Herts for Learning’, a non-profit organisation working closely with the local authority and Hertfordshire schools to develop and deliver innovative and exciting teaching and learning approaches. This helps foster valuable relationships as the Department looks to continue its work within the region. The English expert is part of a network of practitioners based in Newcastle, providing an excellent opportunity to share best practice and promote the Department’s provision outside of Hertfordshire.

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2 Participants have already consented to being contacted and for their data to be used.
6. Programme SWOT analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Expert subject practitioners</td>
<td>• Internal resources are put under pressure as participating schools fail to communicate updated student lists</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Targeted GCSE C grade support</td>
<td>• Social aspects of Autumn School can detract from programme’s main goals</td>
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<td>• Mentor network is a cost-effective strategy for reinforcing skills</td>
<td>• Reliant on schools to provide the right students</td>
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<td>• Strong participant retention throughout the three days</td>
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<tr>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Threats</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Mentor network is a unique aspect helping Department to stand out</td>
<td>• Success partly determined by GCSE results released many months from now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Building wider networks by tapping into practitioners’ networks and best-practice</td>
<td>• Mentor network is outside of Department’s daily control and may need further support</td>
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</table>

7. Summary

One of Autumn School’s most powerful outcomes is that it provides immediate benefits to participating students. Although its full impact cannot be measured until GCSE results are released, the programme has demonstrated its ability to provide students with the tools needed to achieve a C grade, as well as the confidence to implement this new knowledge.

By hosting the event on-campus and involving student ambassadors, Autumn School successfully showcased that higher education is within these students’ reach if they can achieve a C grade.

The implementation of the mentor programme within participating schools helps provide a long-term and sustainable aspect to supporting these students beyond these three days and throughout the school year.

Lastly, throughout the organisation and delivery of Autumn School, the Department has raised its profile by creating new links with local stakeholders and injected the sector with fresh energy by tapping into new networks.
Appendix 1 – Evaluations

Pre Autumn Schools Evaluation

Welcome to the University of Hertfordshire’s Autumn Schools event! We’re really excited to have you here with us. Before we start, we’d just like to ask you a few questions—please answer as accurately as possible. We hope you enjoy the next 3 days!

Name:

Chosen subject (please tick):  ☐ Maths  ☐ English

1. How confident are you in achieving a C grade or higher on your chosen GCSE? Circle one.

   1  2  3  4  5
   Not confident Not that confident Not sure Confident Very confident at all

2. Do you know what skills you need to achieve a C grade or higher on your chosen GCSE? Tick one.

   ☐ Yes  ☐ No  ☐ Not sure

3. What aspects of Autumn Schools are you most looking forward to? Rank the options from 1 to 5, with 1 being what you are most looking forward to.

   Options  | Ranking 1-5
   -----------------------------------
   Improving my study skills
   Going to Thorpe Park
   Discovering the Hertfordshire campus
   Finding out more about university
   Meeting new people

4. How likely are you to apply to university? Circle one.

   1  2  3  4  5
   Not likely Not that likely Not sure Likely Very likely at all


Post Autumn Schools Evaluation

Thanks for participating in our Autumn Schools event! We hope you enjoyed it and gained some useful skills. Help us to improve the event by answering these questions as best you can! Your answers will be kept anonymous.

Name:

Chosen subject (please tick):  ☐ Maths  ☐ English

1. How confident are you in achieving a C grade or higher on your chosen GCSE? Circle one.
   
   1 2 3 4 5
   Not confident at all  Not that confident  Not sure  Confident  Very confident

2. Do you feel you now have the necessary skills to improve your grades? Tick one.
   ☐ Yes
   ☐ No
   ☐ Not sure

3. If you answered ‘No’ or ‘Not sure’, do you know how to go about improving your skills? Tick one.
   ☐ Yes
   ☐ No

4. What aspects of Autumn Schools did you most enjoy? Rank the options from 1 to 5, with 1 being what you enjoyed most.

   Options  | Ranking 1-5
   Improving my study skills  |
   Going to Thorpe Park  |
   Discovering the Hertfordshire campus  |
   Finding out more about university  |
   Meeting new people  |

PLEASE TURN OVER 😊
5. How likely are you to apply to university? Circle one.

1  
Not likely at all

2  
Not that likely

3  
Not sure

4  
Likely

5  
Very likely

6. How engaging was Karen or Lisa? Circle one.

1  
Not engaging at all

2  
Not that engaging

3  
Just OK

4  
Quite engaging

5  
Very engaging

7. How well did Karen or Lisa explain ideas and concepts to you? Circle one.

1  
Not very well at all

2  
Not that well

3  
Just OK

4  
Quite well

5  
Very well

8. How well did Karen or Lisa explain what you need to do on your exam to get a C grade? Circle one.

1  
Not very well at all

2  
Not that well

3  
Just OK

4  
Quite well

5  
Very well

9. Overall, how satisfied are you with Autumn Schools? Circle one.

1  
Not satisfied at all

2  
Not that satisfied

3  
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied

4  
Satisfied

5  
Very satisfied


THANK YOU! 😊