

## **Peer Mentoring for Staff Development in a Changing Work Environment**

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### **Abstract**

This paper details the impact of a formalised staff mentoring scheme on people working in a University in the United Kingdom. It considers aspects of a changing political agenda on the working lives of employees and considers how mentoring can mediate its negative effects. Evaluation data indicates that the scheme provides developmental opportunities, contact with others, emotional support and the opportunity for reflection. It is suggested that these findings are transferable to other large, changing, organisational environments where a variety of occupational groups are employed.

**Key Words:** Mentoring; Higher Education; Implementation; Staff; Change

### **Introduction**

In England in the last twenty years, the Higher Education Sector has undergone fundamental restructuring and phases of financial expansion and retraction (Greenaway & Haynes, 2003). This paper discusses aspects of the impact of these changes on peoples' work and how the introduction of a formal staff mentoring scheme in one University has helped provide support.

The political thrust of these changes has been an expansion of university education, greater emphasis on accountability for increased public funding and the introduction of student fees (Stevens, 2005). The intention has been to provide university places to a larger number of students from a wider social base. This has fuelled debates about widening participation measures, legitimacy of access, and the charge of 'social engineering' and 'dumbing down' (Guardian, 2008) and questions of the value and meaning of higher education (Graham, 2002; Maskell & Robinson, 2002)

Williams (1997) describes an ideological struggle between an economic view of the Higher Education Sector and a traditional liberal idea of a university in which the marketisation of university education, combined with government demands that post-18 education respond to the needs of the economy and the skill sets of workers, compete with the intellectual development of knowledge and critical analysis. Whilst Leitch (2006) adds that economically valuable skills must be delivered through a demand-led approach, facilitated by a new culture of learning and that to attain these goals, higher education must become more efficient, responding to market needs.

The expansion in numbers of university students has seen an increasing diversity in the student body in terms of social background, age and ethnic origin (Anderson & Williams, 2001; Ball, 1990). Teaching staff/student ratios have decreased overall (UCU, 2009) with administrative workload increasing (Kinman, 2008) and changes in course delivery (Barnett & Temple, 2006). The introduction of student fees may have contributed to different expectations from students, with the increase in student satisfaction exercises and consequent debate (Mroz, 2009) contributing to questioning of the purpose of university education.

Such factors have meant significant challenges to the majority of employees in universities which they may be poorly equipped to face, with increasing stress levels and role conflict reported (Kinman & Jones, 2003). A survey investigating occupational stress in all university occupation groups (Tytheleigh, Webb, Cooper, & Ricketts, 2005) identified stressors such as job insecurity, work relationships, exclusion from decision making, restricted resources and poor communication. Frustration, social stratification, denigration and lack of respect have been reported by 'non-academic' staff (Collinson, 2007). Concerns about students' aggressive behaviour to staff has been identified (Lee, 2006; Baty, 2005; Boynton, 2005), with some indication of concern over rising litigation levels (Richards & Haplin, 2006). Investigating the coping strategies reported by academic staff, Abouserie (1996) found attempts to reduce emotional discomforts, address stressors and discuss difficulties with colleagues.

The mentoring literature suggests that mentoring provides benefits which may offer a buffer against the challenges experienced by employees facing organisational change (Viator, 2001). Mentoring is thought to encourage employees to feel appreciated by the organisation as mentors feel their knowledge and experience is valued by their peers and super ordinates with mentees feeling that the organisation is prepared to invest in their future (Clutterbuck, 2008). Mentoring also helps to rekindle the enthusiasm of disillusioned employees (Clutterbuck, 2008) and revitalise plateaued staff and senior staff members (Choa, 1990; Ellass & Raston, 1989; Kram, 1985). It also helps increase the self esteem and self confidence of academic staff (Tracy, Jagosi, Starr & Tarbell, 2001). Mentoring provides a safety valve for career related frustrations, allowing mentees to discuss incidents that impact on their professional lives (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000). Moreover, it provides psychosocial assistance in the work place (Kram, 1985), which assists mentees to deal effectively with role ambiguity, role conflict and perceived environmental uncertainty (Viator, 2001). It can encourage employees to manage changing environments and issues relating to organisational culture and politics, which can impact negatively on self esteem and performance (Carnall, 1990). Mentoring can therefore be seen as a developmental tool which provides a number of organisational benefits above and beyond the benefits to individuals of professional development and career progression (c.f. Clutterbuck, 2008; Viator, 2001; Sosik & Godshalk, 2000).

### **The Provision of Staff Mentoring**

One University in the United Kingdom has implemented a staff mentoring scheme as one of its measures to support people in making the developments required to adapt to the changing work environment. In 2008 this University employed 2,771 staff of which 1,910 were full-time and 1,024 were academics. They service a transitory population of approximately 23,000 students. The University is organised in 10 Academic Schools with an additional range of Service Departments, on three main and two subsidiary campuses (University of Wolverhampton, 2009).

The intention of the scheme was to respond to the differing individual needs of people by offering an opportunity for holistic, dynamic, medium to long term professional development. Therefore, this employer offers all staff within the organisation the opportunity to develop skills or explore career advancement through peer and hierarchical mentoring relationships, which envelops developmental (Megginson, Clutterbuck, Garvey, Stokes, & Garrett-Harris, 2005) and sponsorship (Kram, 1985) relationships, where appropriate. This form of cross institution mentoring, that incorporates all occupation groups, is unusual in universities. The majority of those mentoring schemes depicted in the literature provide developmental opportunities for academic staff alone.

Formal mentoring has been implemented in order to ensure maximum benefits are maintained whilst also guaranteeing that costs of mentoring are controlled or mediated (Ragins & Scandura, 1999). The scheme was initially developed and piloted in a support department that employs

academics, administrators, researchers and PhD students. Through an audit of these groups' needs, the development of mentoring to meet them and the process of evaluation, the scheme was developed to embrace a wide range of occupational roles and levels. Further amendments were made to allow greater flexibility and applicability. The resulting scheme provides cross Academic School/Departmental relationships that offer mentees a level of externality to the mentoring they receive, whilst allowing the mentor to understand the demands of the organisation. The cross organisational approach is considered especially important as work often takes place in department and subject related silos, which rarely encourage multidisciplinary collaboration. Mentors and mentees are contracted to work together for twelve months, during which they spend ten hours in face to face meetings. However, the audit identified that some mentees required short-term, solution focused approach (de Shazer, 1988). They were offered up to four sessions with independently trained coaches from within the University.

A face to face approach was identified as the most appropriate method as it helps generate rapport, maintaining boundaries and managing the expectations of the mentee. The latter is especially important as electronic forms of communication create a 24/7 culture, in which instant responses are expected (McEnery-West & Mulvena, 2008). As matching processes are inherent to the success of mentoring (Gibbs & Telfer, 2008; Cox, 2005) a formal matching process is used. The criteria used matches mentors and mentees based on the type of career development required and work location. In addition some matches were based on personality similarity. As personality tests are not used the decisions about matches are derived from initial assessment interviews and have proved to be successful to date.

Training is provided so that all mentors understand the aims and expectations of the programme and to improve the success of mentoring relationships (Noe, 1988; Single & Muller, 2001). Training shapes mentors behaviours and knowledge and improves the match between capability and successful mentoring (Choa, 1990). As a consequence, mentors undertake a two day training programme that explores assumption making, rapport building, verbal and non-verbal communication, listening skills, posing questions, the stages of the mentoring relationship and mentoring tools and techniques. These skills and knowledge are explored further in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) sessions, which run every month, of which mentors are expected to attend at least four annually.

The importance of supervision in mentoring is now recognised and this area is undergoing significant growth (cf Merrick & Stokes, 2003). As an ethical standard (EMCC, 2004), the scheme provides peer supervision for all mentors to ensure quality (Megginson & Clutterbuck, 1995) and to provide mentors with a normative, formative and restorative experience (Proctor, 2000). Supervision sessions are provided once a month and mentors are expected to attend at least four sessions during their twelve month mentoring contract. A peer group approach was decided upon, as individual supervision was felt to be time consuming and costly, however individual supervision is available upon request. Supervision is facilitated by two qualified counselling supervisors, one of whom is a practicing coach.

Research was implemented to evaluate the involvement of staff in the mentoring scheme. The main research question explored participants' experiences of being involved in the mentoring scheme. Sub-questions explored participants' beliefs about how the scheme impacted on their professional development and on their professional practice. Data analysis highlighted that mentoring not only provided developmental opportunities for staff but was also providing a mechanism for coping with the stressors arising from the constantly changing environment that employees in the Higher Education Sector are facing.

## **Methodology**

A quantitative and qualitative evaluation of the scheme between April 2007 and February 2009 indicates that it is highly successful and provides support for staff beyond aspects of skills or career development (Cureton, 2009).

*Design and procedure:* Retrospective experiential data has been collected using a semi structured, open ended questionnaire. This elicits respondents' views, thoughts and comments about involvement in the scheme; how involvement in the scheme has impacted on their professional practice and any comments they wish to make about the scheme.

The questionnaire was distributed by e.mail to all matched mentors, matched mentees and trained mentors involved in the scheme (N=165). Mentors who were awaiting training and mentees awaiting matching were not included, as it was felt they did not have enough experience of the scheme to comment on its impact. Participants were asked to consider the questions and respond at their own pace. They were also asked to return comments either by email or by internal post, should they wish to provide anonymous responses. Permission was sought to use anonymised quotations from the responses provided.

*Participants:* A randomised sample of responses from 15.15% (n=25) of the scheme participants was gained. The respondents included trained mentors, matched mentors and matched mentees from academic, research and administrative backgrounds. Thus the sample comprised of males (n=6) and females (n=16) who were Lecturers, Senior Lectures, Associate Deans, Professors, Research Fellows, Senior Research Fellows, Administrators, Personal Assistants and Senior Administrators. The sample also included new members of staff, who had been with the institution for less than a year (n=3) and established staff members (n=22).

*Analysis:* A thematic analysis of data was conducted which combined and catalogued related patterns into sub-themes. Themes, the bringing together of components or fragments of an idea or experience (Taylor & Bogdan, 1986), were inductive and semantic, or explicit within the discourse. This was framed within an essential/realist epistemological framework. Themes that emerged from the participants' responses were pieced together to form a comprehensive picture of the collective experience (Constas, 1992) of involvement in the mentoring scheme. This picture was fed back to participants for validation and triangulation purposes.

## **The Impact of Staff Mentoring**

Participation impacted positively on professionalism, relationships with students and other staff, increased productivity and encouraged people to engage in more activities that enhanced the Institution's reputation. The benefits of the scheme also included increased networking, the provision of emotional support, a contribution to enhanced diversity in thinking and greater levels of job satisfaction.

### *Professional Development*

Within the institutional context, the scheme provides opportunities for professional development, recognised by both mentees and mentors (Cureton, 2009). Effective support to develop professional practice is much in evidence within the data. Both academic and research staff have reported that mentoring has enhanced their professional skills base; increased their perceived pedagogic effectiveness and enhanced their capability within Higher Education performance indicators. Mentoring also facilitates the understanding of their professional role, the systems in which they operate and the personal effectiveness of staff within these systems.

*'as for professional practice; it has meant that I have placed a lens once again on how I interact with other staff and students, fine tune my questioning and listening techniques and generally be more conscious about what I do and why I do it'* (academic staff mentor)

*'with the support of my mentor I have moved forward more quickly and effectively with my key objective of being a first class lecturer'* (academic staff mentee)

*'[Mentoring] has provided teaching opportunities and feedback on potential journal articles'* (research staff mentee)

*'[Mentoring] has assisted in determining lecturing quality and effectiveness'* (academic staff mentee)

*'This [mentoring] is valuable because I take the insight back in to the office. It helps me contextualise what I am doing, to put it into proportion and think much more clearly'* (academic staff mentee)

*'This [mentoring] has informed my research activities and made me more productive. I hope the contacts I have made will lead to work and research funding'* (academic staff mentor)

*'Mentoring makes me more productive'* (academic staff mentor and mentee)

*'I have a greater understanding of myself professionally'* (academic staff mentee)

It is interesting that issues emerging from the qualitative data are located firmly within the scope of individual roles, rather than addressing issues drawn from the wider institutional context of the Higher Education Sector. Rather, the focus is on mentoring processes that enable individuals to make meanings for themselves in their particular role. This may be a peculiarity of academic staff establishing and maintaining careers within their disciplines rather than perceiving themselves in sector wide terms (Strike & Taylor, 2009).

#### *Contact with Others*

Many of the staff work in isolated conditions across several locations with few opportunities for contact beyond their immediate colleagues. As a result they may not have many opportunities for peer support. Mentoring provides wider contact, which reduces the feelings of isolation, allows people to meet with others and engage in collaborative projects and share good practice.

*'being part of the mentoring scheme has reduced the feeling of isolation that I, and many others feel. Academia is a very insular environment, the scheme has reduced this'* (academic staff mentor and mentee)

*'The scheme provided the opportunity to network which is valuable'* (academic staff mentor)

*'I have also made contact with other academics and workers in my new research area'* (academic staff mentor and mentee)

This can also bring a wider perspective of working styles.

*'I have reflected on my own work as a result of seeing others' way of working'*  
(Professor mentor)

*'I have gained insight into how other schools work and some of the discussion have given me perspectives I would not normally get in my role'* (academic staff mentor)

Rhodes, Hollinshead & Neville, (2007) highlight the importance of satisfying relationships with colleagues. However, face to face contacts with colleagues are likely to be under threat with current workloads (Tight 2010). The quotations above show the importance of being able to contextualise their own work within the wider organisational environment. This may be important in maintaining resilience in a changing situation (Kinman, 2008).

#### *Emotional Support*

It is suggested that mentoring provides emotional support in the academic environment (Cureton, 2009; Kram, 1985) which may have a positive impact on responses to stressors and an increase in confidence (Tracey et al, 2001). The resources for mentoring may also mitigate against a perceived lack of commitment by the employer, which literature suggests creates employee stress (Tytherleigh et al, 2005).

*'It is comforting to know I have support'* (administration staff mentee)

*'I have an increased confidence'* (academic staff mentee)

*'As a result of mentoring I feel more confident'* (researcher mentor and mentee)

Through the training mentors receive and role modelling the support mentees receive from their mentors, staff report feeling equipped to not only support students, but also other colleagues. By increasing the overall informal supportive capacity of the university, mentoring may offer a further shared strength in a difficult environment (Tytherleigh et al, 2005).

*'It has made me recognise situations where colleagues may benefit from speaking to someone – I have been able to either offer a sympathetic ear myself, or been able to suggest who they could approach, or strategies that may be helpful'* (administration staff mentor)

*'Staff who make good contacts with each other can also make good contact with students. I think we should emphasise human contact and support for staff. I know that I now find it easier to support my students'* (academic staff mentor)

This can mitigate the difficulties of working in a large organisation, which can be intimidating for staff and students.

*'The relationship has also reminded me of how big organisations can be dehumanising for staff and learners and how human contact makes things work, fitting them together increases motivation and satisfaction'* (academic staff mentee)

This may be particularly important for new employees, with some reporting that the mentoring scheme has allowed them to reconsider their decisions to leave the University. They revealed that a variety of incidents had interrupted their induction into the university community.

Having a mentor helped them negotiate these difficulties and feel more comfortable working within the university environment.

### *Reflection*

The findings suggest that mentoring positively impacts on mentees' beliefs about their personal efficacy and their perceived effectiveness in the workplace, which has led to a reported reduction of anxiety. By providing mentees with structured space, they are able to work out their own solutions to the stressors encountered in their working life, to develop new options, new perspectives and different strategies.

Indeed, whilst a minimum of four sessions are required annually for CPD purposes, the data suggests that a core group of mentors, from both academic and administrative occupations, attend many more than this. This is an interesting insight, which is not addressed in the literature discussed earlier. It is one that does need further consideration, particularly when the daily pressures usually encountered by employees are taken into account (Tight, 2010). This suggests that staff value time to reflect. The mentoring literature considers the role of reflective thinking in developing mentors (Cox, 2005b) and that some mentoring and coaching approaches lead to enhanced reflective thinking of the mentee/coachee (Moche, 1999). However the value that is placed on mentoring providing a time to reflect has not been widely discussed in the mentoring literature to date.

*'Mentoring provides time to reflect on workload and managing relationships with colleagues and superiors'* (academic staff mentee)

*'It [mentoring] allows me to think about using my own experiences and journey to offer possible solutions and pitfalls warnings to help another move on, it has been a joy'* (academic staff mentor)

*The training was very useful and enabled me to reflect on my approaches to students'* (academic staff mentor)

One practical outcome of reflection is an improved strategic view relating to enhanced understanding of work situations, solutions and new strategies.

*'...talking about it with my mentor helped me understand myself and the situation better and why it might happen. It has helped me build strategies to cope with it better. I'm less stressed about it now too'* (academic staff mentee)

*'I have [been] given different strategies to cope and approach things which I did not have before'* (administration staff mentor)

*'I have found [my mentor] is a great inspiration and the meetings were a catalyst and energiser to rethink my strategies'* (research staff mentee)

*'[Mentoring provides] time to consider career choices, and provides honest and constructive feedback'* (academic staff mentee)

The scheme was rolled out to academic staff in phase one and developed to include service department and facilities staff in phase two. While lecturers readily signed up to the scheme, it became apparent that others questioned whether it was really available to them. This may be, in part, due to the culture and ethos of universities, in that staff development is often perceived to be geared towards the academic body. However, as publicity is generated principally electronically, there may

be further issues here. One of these relates to the accessibility and perceived relevance of the scheme to employees in Facilities and Estates who are significantly under represented (Cureton, Green & Meakin, 2008). Not every employee has access to electronic communication, and consequently, managers may inadvertently become gatekeepers to access. The inclusion of the mentoring scheme in the Institution's Professional Development Programme may be hindering the recruitment of these particular occupation groups, who may need to be targeted and supported differently. Whereas academic staff value their flexibility over when and where they work (Tytherleigh et al, 2005), these service department and facilities staff have their time tightly controlled as to task and location. Therefore, attending mentoring, training and supervision sessions would be logistically more difficult.

While the scheme has equal numbers of academic and administrative staff, the majority of the feedback provided so far has come from the academic body. This is interesting, and certain possibilities can be suggested. This may be due to academic staff being conversant with and used to being involved in evaluation and feedback, as well as a result of expectations of the usefulness of the information they provide.

We also found that a number of visiting lecturers (VLs) on casual contracts are using the mentoring scheme as a resource, citing the lack of induction or more general support. This use is most often as mentees but it is noted that experienced VLs are applying to be mentors to provide support for new VLs. In the light of their casual teaching contracts, this mentoring activity will be unpaid and so an interesting voluntary activity is being generated. As yet this has not been investigated further, but could relate to concerns about job security and seeking more permanent contracts. Indeed, the current economic climate suggests much job insecurity (Newman, 2009) and restructuring within institutions means that this insecurity goes beyond casual contracted academic staff. Evidence from initial interviews suggests that those who faced, or indeed feared, redundancy are using the scheme to consider career moves beyond the Institution.

### **Implications for Mentoring Practice and Research**

The issues discussed above raise a number of considerations for practice and research. With regard to practice, there are a number of transferable lessons learned from this scheme that are of specific importance when developing or reviewing staff mentoring provision in changing work settings. These relate to the structure and the operation of a scheme, which require reflection in order for the benefits of the scheme to become apparent. It was found that formal mentoring ensures that the relationship is clearly delineated and provides a better chance than informal mentoring of ensuring even distribution of provision across occupation groups. It also allows those with less opportunity to network, to develop links beyond their normal working environments. Encouraging mentors to be non-directive in their mentoring approach encourages mentees to explore options and take ownership of their own development. This positively impacts on all involved in the relationship and the outcomes their relationships produce (Cureton, 2009b).

Allowing the scheme to exist outside of reporting and appraisal systems permits mentoring to focus on the development of individual staff rather than meeting a specific organisational training aim. This generates freedom for both professional and psychosocial development to occur. Voluntary, self selection recruitment to the scheme appears to lead to greater engagement in the process and results in a diverse range of benefits for all stakeholders (Cureton, 2009b). Matching mentor to mentee is key to the success of a mentoring relationship (Cox, 2005), so the matching criteria were based on desired mentoring outcome, location and where possible personality matches. The externality of cross departmental matches appeared to benefit the mentoring process. Allowing the mentee to set goals addresses their specific developmental needs but also allows the process to



develop beyond its professional development aims. The implementation of organisational goals risks inhibiting the full benefits to both mentee and mentor. It is inferred that this could become even more important as financial constraints in the Higher Education Sector may create a dissonance between institutional and individual objectives (Newman, 2010). A continuing research focus would be helpful in monitoring this.

When considering the messages that arise from this work for future research, it is apparent that although research on staff mentoring in academic settings has been carried out, much of this focuses on the mentoring of academic staff. Currently there is little work available in the public domain that considers the impact of mentoring on other staff groups in academic settings. Further work in this area is welcomed to enlighten the development and progression of mentoring for all occupation groups in academic settings.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The mentoring scheme was introduced in the context of changing workloads and conditions in universities accompanied by debates about the value and purpose of the Higher Education Sector. Research addressing the work experience of some university employees have identified stressors which it was thought could be addressed through structured, purposeful collaboration with a colleague from a different part of this large organisation, through the medium of formal mentoring. Interestingly there is no mention in the data of whether the scheme is being used to address the fundamental sector wide changes. The people choosing to participate in the scheme have used it to develop individual responses such as skill development, strategic thinking, networking, emotional support and career consideration. They value the time to reflect in situations where they are responding to many demands, both internal and external.

The current climate is uncertain in terms of job security and future developments within this Sector. Constrictions in funding may result in reductions in staffing (UCU, 2009). Decisions about voluntary redundancy and career change, the uncertainty associated with compulsory redundancy of self and colleagues and further work intensification are probable future work stressors. Job insecurity has already been raised as a stressor (Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua & Stough, 2001) that may lead people to seek mentoring (Cureton & Foster, 2008), which can provide an opportunity outside of line management and immediate colleagues to consider career paths.

However, it has been intriguing to see that some issues presented in our study are less visible within the general mentoring and coaching literature. Of these, the most significant are supervision, reflection and the support of those not involved in the scheme. Supervision is seen as a valuable resource with academic staff, in particular, speaking of supervision sessions as 'an oasis'. This provides an opportunity to not only evaluate their mentoring practice but also consider their working roles and professional practice. A distinctive feature emerging from the data was the appreciation of the space for reflection to step back from everyday tasks. This may reflect reported pressures of time and increased workloads and the need to respond quickly to changing agendas. Involvement in mentoring also helped staff to feel better equipped in providing support to others. This included both those who reported feeling equipped to support students and those feeling capable of offering practical and emotional support to colleagues not involved in formal mentoring.

This study was conducted in an academic environment, yet many of these themes will not be unique to this sector. They can be expected in many large organisations with stratified work forces, located across different venues and disciplines, negotiating rapid change within deepening financial constraints. A mentoring scheme cannot be a solution to all of the pressures faced in today's organisational climate. Evaluation of this scheme has shown it can support staff through

opportunities for development, increased networking, emotional support and time for reflection. When designing such a scheme it is important to clearly identify who it is for. Attention needs to be given to how that is communicated and to the different means of recruitment relevant to different occupation groups.

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