

# In hindsight: the challenges of virtual mentoring the future higher education leaders of Afghanistan

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## Abstract

This article, written in hindsight, is a personal account of a British Council and Afghan Ministry of Higher Education project that sought to establish mentoring relationships between the next generation of leaders in Afghanistan and volunteers from UK higher education. Several learning points have emerged: the need for a simple programme design; the inappropriateness of mentoring to develop management and leadership skills at this time; a desire to formalise inputs; a necessity for face-to-face input and the difficulties of establishing mentoring relationships virtually. These findings contribute to understanding of the difficulties of implementing virtual mentoring within a challenging post-conflict environment.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, virtual mentoring, post-conflict, developing nations, hindsight

## Introduction

In 2010 the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Higher Education asked the British Council to design and manage a project to develop leadership capability within higher education (HE) in Afghanistan. After exploring the needs of leaders in Afghan higher education further, this innovative project was designed by regional and UK-based British Council staff. The project, which focused on establishing virtual remote mentoring relationships between UK and Afghan HE leaders and managers was launched in May 2011. This paper, written in hindsight by the project leader and one of the participants, evaluates its success, identifies the lessons learned and considers how virtual mentoring within developing nations might be undertaken in the future.

The project's aim was to “build capacity and support for the network of next generation leaders in universities; those who will rise to become the leaders and influencers in top positions in the coming years” (British Council, 2010). Like similar international aid projects, for example those by the US Army (Park, 2010), USAID (Fuller, Ficklin & Stein, 2011) and the Italian Air Force (Perchiazzi, Tempestini & Vannuccini, 2013) the aim of the project was to work with the Afghan government to build self-sustaining systems (Gabel, 2010). Mentoring is a “standard tool in a majority of university teacher education programmes” (Dziczowski, 2013 p.352) and developing “higher education institutions benefit

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greatly from connections with similar institutions” (Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000, p.77). The project was designed to connect individuals in UK higher education institutions with their counterparts in Afghanistan, providing support to carry out individual projects.

It is estimated that in 2013 over 100,000 students will be eligible to enter higher education and “accommodating this influx of students is the biggest challenge for the country’s higher education system over the next decade” (Chauhan, 2008 p.43). Higher education in Afghanistan faces many challenges, including physical facilities, no existing quality assurance mechanisms, out of date curriculum, low skilled faculty and a lack of strategic institutional level planning (Chauhan, 2008, The World Bank, 2012). The Ministry’s recent strategic plan highlights developing management capacity as a necessity (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Higher Education, 2009, p.10). In identifying a missing generation of higher education expertise, it states that “strategies to improve leadership, management and administration will be an integral part of staff development”. Within this context a leadership programme could have covered a wide range of topics including managing and motivating teams, organisational structures and dynamics, teamwork and people development (Williams, 1994, 1996).

For a number of years, the British Council has been increasing its role in higher education beyond student recruitment into projects that have a direct and sustainable influence on the higher education infrastructures of its overseas partners. The Council’s involvement in leadership development had hitherto largely involved the organisation of study visits to the UK. Recently, however, it has become concerned about the value of the study visit approach as it was not always considered efficient or value for money when considered in terms of return on investment. The Council was keen to respond creatively to the Afghan Ministry’s request for a leadership development programme, seeing this as an opportunity to explore new approaches to leadership development which exploited technological advances and might provide more sustainable and appropriate solutions. By focusing on a mentoring programme, the British Council sought to overcome barriers of geographical distance (Pachler & Redondo, 2012) through e-mentoring. Definitions of e-mentoring often combine the traditional aspects of mentoring, for example a senior individual working with one who is less skilled (Single and Muller 2001 p.8), and a caring, structured relationship (US National Mentoring Working Group) with computer-mediated communication (Bierema and Merriam, 2002). This communication may be synchronous or asynchronous, formal or informal, one-to-one or in a group setting (Clutterbuck and Hussain, 2010) using tools such as email, Skype and social networking spaces. In the context of this research e-mentoring can be defined as “when a mentoring relationship is conducted electronically, by email or other method” (Brockbank & McGill, 2006 p.71) and is closely linked to capacity building making a systematic and systemic contribution to knowledge development (Pachler & Redondo, 2012).

Within developing nations mentoring can be used to develop talent as it offers a platform for action learning (van Deuren, 2013) and opportunities for the exchange of tacit knowledge (Kapur and Crowley, 2008). Mentoring provides a relatively quick and measurable output from a training programme, and as it focuses on the development of human resources it provides a way for "developing countries to adopt and develop improved ways of supporting their own national educational systems " (Lansang and Dennis, 2004 p.768).. Within this context a mentor could undertake a number of different roles including career development, knowledge sharing, coaching (Brockbank & McGill, 2006), acting as a supporter, counsellor, educator or sponsor” (Dziczowski, 2013). The British Council, however, developed a project-based programme which sought to implement a transitional cultural change approach, with participants

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questioning the status quo and being encouraged to solve newly identified problems by reshuffling priorities and directions (Kochan & Pascarelli, 2012). This development of the project and its approach is described below.

## **Methodology**

The authors of this article are, respectively, the UK programme leader and one of the UK mentors. We are writing in hindsight, aware of the project's outcomes. We therefore acknowledge that, in the main, this is a reflection on our own understanding and experiences of the project. We are aware that outcome knowledge affects judgement and own perceptions (Fischhoff 1975); however we have attempted to recall 'What Really Happened' while acknowledging that claims to complete objectivity may remain unsatisfactory (Freeman, 2010).

In this article we have brought together a sequence of events and a series of facts to create a narrative. Evidence has been systematically collected from our own experiences, formal and informal interactions with participants, programme surveys and interviews with the British Council and the Ministry of Higher Education. It is felt that these additional data sets make this hindsight narrative more robust. Further considering the reliability of this account's hindsight basis "refers to a biased representation of events or facts once they are viewed in hindsight with knowledge of the outcome" (Blank et al 2007 p.2) and the 'difference between two judgements once made in hindsight, and one in foresight' (Pezzo 2011 p.666). This type of hindsight bias is not present in this article as at no point did the authors seek to predict the outcome of the project. As the decision to write up the findings and learning points from the programme was taken towards the end of the project there is obviously a lag between past and present, experience and hindsight. We are seeing the past through present eyes, reviewing and reconstructing the project from afar. Where possible we have sought to avoid retrospective bias, when memories of past experiences are influenced by current beliefs (Freeman, 2010).

A hindsight review of the project allows us to learn from our experience. When using hindsight however, learning is often prevented by two other types of bias. Retroactive pessimism leads participants to actively look for external events that have led to failure and attributes blame to these, absolving the self of responsibility for failure, and in defensive processing people perceive or at least report failure events as unforeseeable, again failing to consider any potential internal reasons for a lack of success (Pezzo and Pezzo 2007). It is clear that the challenging Afghan environment meant that several unforeseeable external events, such as the destruction of the British Council facilities, led to the partial failure of the programme. However, in order to obtain meaningful learning we have sought to go beyond apportioning blame for the non-fulfilment of the project to the external factors.

As the project was not designed as a case study, ethnography or action learning project it is difficult to further establish reliability and validity. However, given the unusual context of the programme and the lack of similar types of projects within developing nations it was felt that there is relevance, that the findings are intrinsically interesting and that learning from the project would make a valuable contribution to the literature (O'Reilly, 2009). The findings are transferable to other e-mentoring projects within Afghanistan and the wider world, in particular to other "other situations or settings which are similar" (O'Reilly, 2009 p.84) such as in developing or post-conflict nations, and findings can be used to inform future projects (Hammersley, 1992).

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## The Project

The original concept for the programme called PAL (Partners in Academic Learning) as developed by the British Council was threefold: One-to-one mentoring relationships, delivered remotely by HE staff in the UK. Each UK mentor was to work with three Afghan higher education leaders or managers. The mentoring was to be delivered virtually with computer-mediated communication the only or primary method of communication (Ensher, Heun & Blanchard, 2003). Mentoring was to be undertaken by Skype and the British Council video conferencing facilities in Kabul.

Each Afghan mentee would identify a project that would be the principal focus for the mentoring relationship. This project was designed to deliver value to the individual's institution as well as provide a focus for the individual's development as a leader and the focus of individual, and possibly institutional, culture change.

Groups of three mentees would form action learning sets, linked by the focus of their project and facilitated by their common mentor. These groups would travel to Kabul periodically to meet with their UK mentor via the video-conferencing facilities at the British Council in Kabul. These action learning sets aimed to encourage peer-to-peer mentoring. This meant that mentoring was to be provided individually and also on a group basis.

### *Programme launch and mentor recruitment and selection (Afghanistan)*

As in all sectors of Afghan governance, war (1979-1997 with the then Soviet Union, and 2001 to the present the counter-insurgency 'War against Terror') has led to a missing generation in higher education. Talented faculty have fled the country, leaving a shortage of trained and qualified faculty and well-educated and trained leaders (The World Bank, 2012, Chauhan, 2008). There is a largely elderly senior leadership that pre-dated the conflicts; and an intake of young academics who are inexperienced in management but are being given middle (and senior) management roles despite their lack of experience. This made recruitment to the programme within Afghanistan difficult. It was decided that there was likely to be greater strategic value in focusing on emerging leaders who had the potential for future development and whom the Ministry and current Chancellors felt were likely to rise to become the leaders and influencers in top positions in coming years. The Ministry was also keen to ensure that the programme involved a balance of gender, locations and size of higher education institutions. Another key criterion was English language skills. The selection of Afghan participants was made by British Council staff in Kabul, in consultation with the Ministry.

The participant group included two young Chancellors, several Vice Chancellors, as well as Deans and Project Managers, plus three participants from the Ministry of Higher Education. The majority of the participants had been thrown into a highly challenging environment. Their role did not necessarily reflect the extent of their experience or their development as a manager or leader. It is also worth noting that, unlike in the UK HE Sector, Afghan universities did not have developed professional support structures. Most participants combined an academic role with managerial responsibility and all academic staff felt that their priority was their teaching.

Once the programme had been designed and the Afghan participants recruited, the British Council commissioned the UK Programme Manager to facilitate and deliver a five-day workshop in Kabul for the

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Afghan participants. The UK Programme Manager, who was an expert in leadership development and mentoring, co-facilitated the workshop with the University Secretary of the University of Leicester, England, who later became one of the mentors.

During the workshop the group identified themes that they wanted to focus on during the programme. These were: quality; structures and planning; administration; team leadership and motivation. Participants were then divided into action learning sets according to their priority within these themes and then, with help from their colleagues, they identified their individual projects. The British Council video-conferencing facilities were trialled with staff from the University of Leicester who acted as learning set facilitators. The nature of mentoring relationships was explored, with modelling and examples provided. Although “the concept of mentoring is not new for the people of the subcontinent” (Shamim, 2013 p.619) it more usually takes on the guise of an elder in tribe, family, teacher or senior colleagues acting as an unplanned and informal mentor. Many of the component parts of the programme (formal mentoring; action learning sets) were new concepts to the majority of the participants and so much of the five days was spent in explaining these. Though this served the needs of the programme, it was not necessarily an appropriate balance of content, as during the week it became clear that the majority of the group, unsurprisingly, lacked a basic understanding of leadership and management.

The other aspect of the launch workshop that is of note is the unfamiliarity of the participants with the facilitative approach and style used by the facilitators. This had two positive outcomes. First, on a personal level they felt that they had been involved in an aid agency-run workshop which used an enabling process that promoted ownership of decisions, with participants creating their own solutions. This was viewed as unusual as they were more accustomed to an instructive consultancy approach (Boud & McDonald, 1981). Second, as academics they saw the facilitative style of teaching and learning as one that they would like to be able to use with their students. Indeed some participants were more interested in this aspect of the workshop than in their development as leaders and managers.

#### *Programme launch and mentor recruitment and selection (UK)*

Turning to the UK, the project was first announced to the UK community through a workshop in London in October 2010 (British Council). The proposal for the leadership programme was presented and feedback received from the group. In May 2011 the British Council contacted all of the workshop attendees seeking individuals who were experienced in senior management roles in their universities in the UK and interested in giving virtual support and guidance to cluster groups of Afghanistan successor leaders. Applicants were asked to submit a CV and a short statement that explained any relevant experience. As mentoring offers benefits to both the mentors and the mentees (Dziczowski, 2013), participants were also asked to outline their interest in, and personal ambitions for the project.

Final selection of the UK mentors was made following the launch workshop in Kabul. During this workshop the Afghani participants (in their action learning sets) had been asked to develop criteria for their mentor. These contributed to a final set of selection criteria that included: experience of working in Afghanistan or in a development context, expertise aligned to the themes of the action learning sets, leadership and management experience and mentoring skills.

Eight UK mentors (from only 12 applications) were selected to participate in the programme. Many of the applications received were from academic staff whose skills sets did not immediately match group

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requirements, as seven of the eight action sets learning focused on managerial rather than academic challenges. Additionally, only two of the applicants had significant management/leadership experience which at the start of the programme was deemed as an important selection criterion. Selection was therefore based primarily on matching knowledge and expertise to the needs of the action learning sets.

The UK mentors were brought together in July 2011 for a one-day workshop. During the workshop they were given information about mentoring techniques, the mentees, their individual projects and the parameters of the programme. The group decided that first contact with the Afghan partners would be made by an email from the UK participant to the Afghan partner. This email would introduce themselves, their area of expertise and suggest dates when a video conference could be organised. It was agreed that the first meeting with mentees would focus on discovering the background of Afghan participants and on how they saw their projects developing over the coming months. All Afghan partners except one responded favourably to the initial email, agreeing dates and times for contact.

Following the UK launch, the programme comprised ongoing contact between participants. No structure was provided for this contact and it was left to the two partners to make their own arrangements and decide on the frequency, duration and focus of their contact. The UK-based Programme Manager provided support to the UK mentors and scheduled reviews at three monthly intervals. In addition, the Programme was supported by an Afghan British Council HE Project Manager based in Kabul and a British Council Regional HE Project Manager based in Dhaka, Bangladesh, who provided additional ongoing support as required. The Afghanistan-based Programme Manager was particularly helpful in offering additional background information on each of the participating institutions and also updates on progress within the Ministry of Higher Education. She also followed up with participants who had not sustained contact with their UK mentor and liaised with the UK programme manager over workshop content and evaluations of the programme. None of the programme managers had any experience of e-mentoring.

## **Discussion**

This retrospective analysis of the project has allowed us to draw on a number of different sources, combining learning from both the project manager who had an overview of all participants and from one of the UK mentors who offers an 'on the ground' perspective. This section explores how the project evolved and adapted; its challenges and barriers and successes.

### *Challenges and adaptations*

Ensher et al. (2003) identifies five major challenges of online mentoring: the likelihood of miscommunication; the slow development of relationship when compared to face-to-face mentoring; the need for both parties to be competent in both written communication and technical skills; the possibility of computer malfunctions and issues of privacy and confidentiality. Review conversations with the UK mentors three months into the programme and feedback from the Afghan Programme Manager led to concerns that the programme design was over-elaborate and the attack on the British Council compound in Kabul (see below) was used as an opportunity to review and modify the design of the programme. It became apparent very quickly that the programme faced a number of significant challenges although not all of them were related to the online environment.

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In order to deal with the challenges a number of adaptations to the programme were required. Some of these were in response to external factors that were beyond the control of the project while others were suggested by participants or the Programme Manager. These can be summarised into six main topics: the lack of a reliable IT platform to support visual contact and lengthy conversation for either individual or group sessions; English language skills; the appropriateness of the mentoring approach; the individual projects that had been identified during the Kabul workshop; the lack of knowledge around management and leadership, and the original six-month length of the project.

#### *Making and sustaining contact – technology*

The initial plan was that the action learning set sessions would be conducted using the video-conference facilities of the British Council in Kabul. This was to provide a degree of visual contact between participants and offer a way for participants to network among themselves. However the devastating attack on the British Council premises in Kabul in August 2011 (BBC News, 2011) meant that these facilities were no longer available to the Afghan participants and in effect the action learning sets ceased before they started.

For the individual projects it was anticipated that connectivity would be sufficiently robust to support Skype contact (the British Council had provided some participants with a laptop at the Kabul workshop). However, this proved to be over-optimistic and connectivity was not robust enough for Skype to provide the main channel of communication. Despite trying different times of day (the middle of the night in Afghanistan and early in the morning in the UK) connections often dropped, video could not be used and speech became distorted and difficult to follow. It was possible to make contact, but not to sustain conversation and this caused frustration. A mid-point questionnaire showed that 16 out of 23 Afghani participants were finding Skype problematic.

In a further attempt to remedy the situation, the British Council provided Afghan participants with modems. However, the poor telecommunications infrastructure within Afghanistan meant that this measure had no discernible impact on connectivity. One UK participant successfully used a landline telephone to speak to his individual mentees and this worked well but would be prohibitively expensive if used on a wider scale. Alongside this, language was also proving to be more of a problem than originally anticipated (see below) and so mentors were encouraged to use email as the basis for the relationship. The workshop in Dubai (outlined below) introduced another type of computer-mediated communication; an online forum. The forum was intended to provide participants with an additional method of communication and a means of staying in touch with each other and to provide an alternative and more flexible means of communication between UK mentors and their mentees, allowing the wider group to "increase comfort level and learn about each other in multiple contexts" (Ensher et al., 2003 p.284). Participants were able to post documents and materials on the forum and it was divided into topics offering a way for the action learning set groups to re-form in another environment.

#### *Making and sustaining contact – language*

Despite undertaking a needs analysis of the Afghan participants and screening for English language skills it became apparent early in the programme that some participants did not speak English well enough to be able to communicate with their mentor or support a meaningful mentoring relationship, especially one conducted remotely over a fragile technological platform. This had a detrimental effect on the mentoring relationship. Participants whose written English was better than their spoken English found

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email particularly useful and its revise-ability was evident, with mentees using the asynchronous time to carefully formulate their questions and responses (Pachler & Redondo, 2012). However, this did not always provide a solution as some individuals were not comfortable expressing themselves orally or in writing, confirming that a lack of written skills on the part of the mentee makes online mentoring less effective (Ensher et al., 2003).

#### *The appropriateness of the mentoring approach*

In addition to the technological and language issues mentioned earlier, three key difficulties emerged for the mentees in establishing strong working relationships with their mentors. Across Afghanistan there is a mix of languages and socio-political conditions (Fuller et al., 2011, Park, 2010) which affects relationships among professionals and co-workers (Williams, 2011). Culturally, Afghan participants are accustomed to a deferential, passive relationship to elders (Rubin, 1995) with elders promoting the "Afghan cultural affinity for autocracy and consensus-building" (Park, 2010 p.49). This seemed to transfer to the mentoring relationships. Little is written about Afghan business behaviour. Although classified as a non-Arab Muslim nation speaking a different language, it is viewed as "ethnically distinct from the inhabitants of the Arab world" (Gesteland, 2012 p.215).

Mentoring research tends to focus on the role of the US and international community in the face-to-face mentoring of the Afghan military (Park, 2010; Fuller et al., 2011; Gabel, 2010). Participants found that challenges in establishing mentoring relationships included organisational culture, tribal identities and government legitimacy and centralised decision making (Park, 2010; Fuller et al., 2011). These military mentoring programmes have developed carbon copies of US doctrines within Afghanistan, focusing on teaching American operational systems to the Afghans (Park, 2010). This together with other international aid work has led to a culture in which individual Afghans want to emulate and import educational cultures.

The perceived "superiority" of the UK higher education system meant that many of the Afghan participants regarded their UK partners more as experts, expecting them to provide information and solutions rather than engage in reflective discussion. In addition, the participants' understanding and experience of leadership and management generally and their role as leaders in HE specifically was under-developed. They were therefore not necessarily used to discussing management challenges in a structured way, nor to reflecting on themselves as managers and leaders. Finally the scale of the challenges faced by the participants in Afghanistan was so enormous that it was hard for participants to see how occasional and technically problematic conversations with someone working in a completely different context could be of assistance.

#### *The Project Focus*

Participants had identified individual projects during the Kabul workshop. This had not been a straightforward process, as the concept of "project" was not necessarily familiar to all participants. Time was spent at the workshop to ensure that the projects were realistic and achievable, but it later transpired that many of the projects were inappropriate. This was either because progress on the projects was dependent on decisions made elsewhere, such as in the Ministry of Higher Education, or higher in their institution's structure.

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At this stage in its post-conflict evolution the Ministry of Higher Education exercises a high level of central control. Universities in Afghanistan have little autonomy (The World Bank, 2012) and the individuals on the programme had even less. Some of the projects were too complicated or challenging to be addressed by the individual working on their own as they reflected systemic problems often caused by the chronic lack of resources. Not only did most of the participants lack the experience and resources to address some of the projects they had identified, they also lacked a realistic sense of agency. These limitations meant that the projects became a problem rather than, as originally intended, the focus for discussion. There were exceptions; some projects which were not resource or decision-dependent were relatively achievable. These included the development of a departmental strategic plan, developing a data management plan and the organisation of a conference. The project focus made the mentoring approach more functionalist in its approach (Brockbank & McGill, 2006) as there was a direct learning outcome. However as the project focus fell away from the programme UK participants were left with no reference points from which to approach their mentoring.

#### *Input on leadership and management and the Dubai workshops*

As mentioned earlier, UK mentors found the project focus problematic. As an alternative it was suggested that they focus more on the daily reality of the Afghan participants, concentrating on the ways in which their mentees related to their daily roles. The transition from projects to more general issues replaced one set of challenges with another. There was no familiarity with a process of critical self-reflection and so some of the Afghan participants found this approach difficult to engage with. Early evaluations of the programme established that the Afghan partners needed direct input on leadership and management and that it was not appropriate or efficient for this to be provided via the mentoring sessions. As a result, it was decided to offer the Afghan participants an additional workshop which focused on the role of the manager and core management skills.

The worsening security situation in Afghanistan led to the additional workshop being delivered in Dubai. The workshop was co-delivered by the UK Programme manager and one of the UK mentors, a Staff Development Manager from the University of Cumbria, England. The workshop first involved a review of progress with the mentoring relationships and time was spent exploring how best to get value from the UK mentors, including setting reasonable expectations, using email for communication and moving away from the focus on projects. Second, a master class on quality assurance was delivered via Skype by one of the mentors from the Open University, England. Quality assurance is a key priority for the Ministry of Higher Education and many of the participants were directly involved in the implementation of the Ministry's new Self-Assessment Framework within their universities. The third part of the workshop involved sessions on leadership and management. These allowed participants to explore the relationship between leadership and their own position, focusing on their individual potential to influence their organisations beyond their fixed role. In response to participant feedback a number of specific skills development sessions were delivered, including influencing, project planning, meetings management, change management and people management.

#### *Length of the programme*

After a review meeting with the UK mentors in December 2011 it was decided to extend the programme from twelve to eighteen months. At this point the programme had been running for six months and it was clear from feedback that it was taking longer than anticipated to establish a working

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relationship and that it was unrealistic to expect the programme to deliver tangible value within a further six month period.

## **Reflection and lessons learned**

### *Programme evaluation*

A programme evaluation was conducted after twelve months. At this point eight Afghan participants withdrew from the programme, four of whom did so because of changes in job or location and one because he was found a more suitable subject mentor by his programme mentor. Three participants had never engaged with the programme beyond the face-to-face workshops, one saying they did not value online communication, another citing time constraints, the third provided no reason. Seventeen of the Afghan participants stated that they wished to continue with the programme. All gave a clear indication of what issues they wanted to focus on in the remaining six months.

At this point it was surprising that so many people wanted to continue the relationship with their mentors as, in most cases, there was little contact between them. It was felt that there were several possible reasons for this including the fact that there was nothing to be gained from ending the relationship, the potential to contact the mentor for support was seen as useful, there was evidence of a desire to maintain the mentor relationship for network reasons only and the hope that other face-to-face workshops might be offered to participants in the future. From the data it can be concluded that the most positive element of the programme for all participants was the workshops. This was for four reasons: first, they were face to face, second, they provided training input, third, they enabled people from different higher education institutions to meet, share and work together and finally because they were conducted in a facilitative style. Less positively, the lack of structure to the programme and the consequent level of autonomy it required of the participants, was challenging and in some cases too much so for several participants who were used to operating in a top-down, high control culture described earlier. The mentoring relationships were appropriate and highly effective for seven of the twenty five participants; the other relationships which continued were felt by participants to be of some but not significant value. From the UK perspective the mentor recruitment process was predicated on goodwill and did not fully reflect the needs of a leadership development programme nor the need to straddle academic and non-academic leadership. Throughout the programme the UK mentors were provided with individual support from the UK Programme Manager, who regularly reviewed progress, offered advice about the mentoring process and gave updates on the programme.

Mentoring relationships often break down due to time constraints, incompatible pairing of mentors and mentees and the choice of inappropriate or ill-trained mentors (Dziczowski, 2013). There was however no evidence that the mentor relationships ceased for these reasons. Three UK mentors withdrew from the programme: one because of ill-health; one because of job change; and one because all three of his Afghan partners had left the programme. During the final review meeting varying levels of frustration were expressed. However several of the mentors were also clear that, despite the difficulties, they had found their participation in the programme to be a valuable learning experience. Some felt it raised their awareness of the challenges of international leadership and management while others had found it beneficial to learn about the challenges of higher education in developing nations.

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## Key learning points

### *E-mentoring*

Pachler and Redondo identify five benefits of online mentoring (Pachler & Redondo, 2012). The programme demonstrated the first; greater access; as it allowed participants to communicate and build relationships over a geographical distance. There is no evidence that equalization of status with the UK mentors occurred within the mentoring partnerships. In the successful relationships, the UK mentor was viewed as the dominant and knowledgeable party by the Afghan participants. Demographics, including age and gender, were not discussed within the programme, pairings were based on interests and subject expertise and there was no evidence that age or gender was a barrier or factor in the success or breakdown of partnerships.

The British Council did not aim to reduce costs through the e-mentoring programme; rather to explore alternatives to study tours; and so this element cannot be considered, and while participants have records of their interactions there is, to date, no evidence that these are used for reference by any participants. There are however six key learning points from the project. These have been developed into the following set of key principles that will underpin future British Council-led e-mentoring programmes in developing nations.

### *Programme design.*

The first learning point was around the design of the programme. In hindsight it is clear that the original programme design was over-ambitious and over-optimistic. It was solution-driven rather than needs- or resource-driven, with the design coming from a western perception of what should be included in a good leadership development programme. Insufficient attention was paid to the actuality of the people and their operating context in Afghanistan. During the Kabul workshop it was clear that the entry level of skills and experience of participants was lower than anticipated. In hindsight, given the lack of knowledge around leadership and management it would have been better to plan the initial workshop around a series of activities which explored the meaning of leadership, management and the participants' roles and current effectiveness as leaders and managers.

Added to this it was clear that participants would have welcomed the opportunity to shape the programme (within the design they were presented with) and to make decisions about their involvement in it. In other words a dialogic approach (Alexander, 2008) leading to a co-construction of the design of the programme would have empowered the participants to shape the activities, thus raising their level of understanding and buy-in and generating a design with a far greater likelihood of success in this challenging environment. In turn this would have developed a shared understanding of the role of a leader in HE in Afghanistan at that time and raised critical self-awareness amongst participants about their areas for development. It is unlikely that a jointly designed programme would have included sophisticated elements like action learning sets, or even projects. It is more probable that the design would have been based on simple building blocks which were easy to understand and likely to succeed.

The design was also heavily dependent on a set of unproven assumptions about the robustness of broadband connectivity, and the appropriateness of remote mentoring. The destruction of the video-conference facilities in the British Council compound was most unfortunate, but the difficulties in establishing one-to-one mentoring via Skype had a far more negative impact on the programme.

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## **The mentoring approach.**

Mentoring or coaching is a well-established approach to management development in the UK, and increasingly so in HE in the UK (Ramsden, 1998). It has a number of advantages, including individual focus and flexibility of delivery. It also has a number of prerequisites, of which the most obvious are a good mentor and a mentee who understands and freely chooses mentoring as an approach and is willing to open him- or herself to a process of self-exploration (Williams, 2011). The fundamentalist approach to mentoring which the projects promoted was at odds with the more transformative aims of the programme, which aimed to implement a transition cultural change through a coaching model.

The concept of mentoring was new to the majority of the Afghan participants. It was not a concept that was easily referable within the Afghan culture and importantly it was not an approach that was freely chosen by them. Mentoring involves supporting an agenda that is driven by the mentee and thus requires some maturity as a manager, a capacity for critical self-reflection and a willingness/ability to engage in reflective dialogue about their performance in addressing challenges. Time was spent during the Kabul workshop in defining, discussing and illustrating the approach but it became clear as the programme progressed that not enough time had been spent exploring how comfortable the participants were in engaging in such an alien relationship, let alone one that was to be conducted remotely from the beginning. In essence, mentoring was not the most appropriate development solution for participants as it did not match the development stage they had reached as leaders and or managers.

In hindsight it might have been more useful to have focused on the word “support” (an outcome) rather than “mentoring” (a solution), and to have looked at ways in which people situated in the UK could best support their colleagues. It was clear from the feedback from the Afghan participants that the lack of face-to-face contact was a barrier to the development of working relationships. The feeling was that where possible the mentors and mentees should, as Ensher et al. (2003) suggest, meet face-face at some point in the programme, preferably at the beginning, to kick-start the relationship.

Two of the UK mentors felt that they could have made a more substantial contribution if they had been able to operate as consultants/trainers rather than mentors, making a direct contribution using their expertise to fill gaps in knowledge and experience that could not be easily addressed by mentoring. In these instances the mentors moved towards a didactic approach which focused on knowledge transfer (Brockbank & McGill, 2006). Consultancy focuses on a specific pre-defined issue and offers front-loaded input to develop understanding and skills before focusing on ongoing support that can include elements of additional training and mentoring (Kubr, 2005). While it is not necessarily the most appropriate approach in all cases this learning point was instrumental in the British Council's re-thinking of approaches to developing leadership capacity in higher education in Afghanistan and in other countries.

### *UK recruitment and reciprocity.*

Notwithstanding the difficulties of matching mentors to mentees, the PAL Programme was fortunate in having a strong group of UK-based mentors who were highly committed to the process and who brought a wide range of expertise to the programme. Nevertheless, it became clear that a more structured approach to recruiting and working with mentors in the UK would be more effective in the future.

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Sessions on e-facilitation as a core skill of e-mentoring (Pachler & Redondo, 2012) should be included in future programmes so that participants had appropriate skills to build rapport over CMC. In hindsight it would have been helpful for training to have highlighted awareness of mentees' culture and environment so that participants had a greater understanding of the challenges mentees faced (Leidenfrost, Strassnig, Schabmann, Spiel & Carbon, 2011). The developmental value to the UK mentor could be defined as an opportunity to develop their mentoring skills, allowing them to reflect on their own leadership/management skills through the process of supporting their partner. It would also offer a formal opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the international context in higher education, and the challenges faced by managers in different contexts.

For future programmes it is suggested that recruitment should focus on managers at a particular stage in their own development; sufficiently experienced to bring value to the mentoring relationship; and also seeking to develop their own experience and skills as a manager. If such a recruitment process were to be successful, future programmes would have a formal reciprocal value which would have a number of potential benefits and implications. This approach was taken with a version of the programme run in Bangladesh (see below).

#### *The value of face-to-face input*

Participant feedback showed that the workshops in Kabul and Dubai were highly valued. Future programmes need to find ways of incorporating forms of direct input on relevant subjects in order to create a platform for the programme. As mentioned earlier participants all benefited from the facilitative approach and style used by the facilitators on the workshops delivered in the PAL Programme. Direct input in this context, therefore, should be understood to be facilitated training workshops as distinct from lectures, formal presentations etc.

#### *Online forum*

The addition of the online forum launched during the Dubai workshop was, in hindsight, a waste of resource. At the time it was felt that an asynchronous forum would provide the Afghan partners with networking opportunities across the small groups and wider programme. The forum was unsuccessful for two reasons. First, access to a stable internet connection was difficult to maintain and so accessing the forum was a challenge. Second, the forum was introduced mid-way through the programme rather than as an integral part of it introduced at the start. For these reasons it is difficult to evaluate the potential usefulness of an online forum for future programmes. One has however been incorporated into the Bangladesh programme described later.

#### *Language*

More robust checks on the levels of spoken and written English would have been appropriate. Programmes such as this require a higher level of spoken and written English than was fully appreciated at first. This is problematic in locations such as Afghanistan when programmes are targeting the individuals who most need such a programme as they do not necessarily have strong English language skills. There are no easy answers. Reducing the dependency on spoken English can help, and email seemed to provide a better platform for communication in some cases.

In conclusion, and to summarise: more research on e-mentoring within developing nations needs to be undertaken before the benefits can be more clearly understood. In future projects it might be

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possible to implement a more action research-focused methodology. This would allow the researchers to document and evaluate the different stages of the research, which might in turn lead to the more formal generation of theory (Lomax, 1994).

## **The Future**

The authors feel that the conclusions drawn from this project enhance our understanding of both the physical and cultural challenges of implementing e-mentoring within a developing nation such as Afghanistan. The hindsight approach to evaluating the impact of this project has provided valuable learning points and the six learning principles are currently being incorporated in two other British Council projects. The Strengthening Leadership Capacity Programme (SLCP) in Bangladesh is a simplified version of PAL1. It is based on a mixture of direct input and remote mentoring, and focuses on developing leaders of the future.

The programme began in March 2012 with a three day workshop that explored concepts of leadership and management in higher education and the principles of leadership development. PAL 2, the second Afghanistan programme, was approved by The British Council and the Ministry of Higher Education in Afghanistan in October 2012 and is now in the implementation stages. It follows the consultancy model, with the focus on quality assurance, which is an ongoing strategic priority for the Ministry. The programme involves six higher education institutions in Afghanistan nominating a lead individual who will be the Chair or a member of their Quality Committee. The lead individual will, through the programme, develop their expertise in quality assurance as well as their leadership skills in facilitation and change management. Support will be provided by UK quality assurance experts primarily by email and will focus on the development and implementation of a quality assurance improvement plan for each institution. A workshop in the UK is being planned to launch the programme, offering direct input and an opportunity for mentors and mentees to meet face-to-face and for participants to network with each other.

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