The Impact of Mentoring on Stress in Higher Education

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Abstract
The aim of this research is to understand the association between stress and involvement in a mentoring relationship within a higher education context. Three studies were carried out, within the same large UK University targeting both mentees and mentors involvement in one particular mentoring scheme, for their views and perceptions about mentoring and stress. The keys findings within this case study are that mentoring does allow both mentors and mentees to feel supported, particularly in times of pressure and stress. Mentoring helps to raise self-awareness, confidence levels and helps further develop professional relationships for both parties. Through engaging in ongoing reflection together, mentors and mentees feel that mentoring has had a positive impact on their work-related stress and has provided them with coping strategies. Ultimately, the suggestion is that involvement in mentoring provides strategies for coping with situations, the opportunity to reflect and leads to feeling valued.

Introduction
Higher education is a rapidly changing environment (Ramsden 2000), which can result in a potential stressful working atmosphere for all institutional staff. On average, 5.9 days per employee are lost to sickness per year in higher education (HE) and the most prevalent cause of absence is stress related (DLA Piper Rudnick Gary Cary, 2005). This is costly for individual institutions and the sector as a whole. This is an expense that a sector with a rapidly shrinking funding budget will struggle to consume. Consequently, there is a need to consider ways of protecting staff within higher education institutions from stress and/or equipping them with the strategies for coping with stress, which does not further stretch the purse strings.

Mentoring is seen as an excellent development tool and effective support mechanism, to help people adjust more readily to the changing times (Cranwell-Ward et al 2004) and there is a known positive relationship between mentoring and reduced stress (Sosik & Godshalk , 2000). To this end, exploring stress in higher education, the impact of mentoring and to share research results that attempt to explain this phenomenon further is a worthwhile exercise.

Occupational Stress, Stressors and Higher Education
The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) suggest:

> *"There is a difference between stress and pressure. We all experience pressure on a daily basis, and need it to motivate us and enable us to perform at our best. It's when we experience too much pressure without the opportunity to recover that we start to experience stress."* Thus the HSE define stress as "*the adverse reaction a person has to*

excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them” (HSE 2004).

Support for this is found in a cognitive definition of stress forwarded by Palmer, Cooper et al. (2003) who propose that :

'Stress occurs when the perceived pressure exceeds your perceived ability to cope'.

From this, one can see that a number of factors could influence the degree of pressure or stress that an individual experiences. The demand that actually exists is coloured by the individual's perception of the pressure created by the demand. Their perceived ability to cope with the pressure will determine the degree of stress experienced by the individual. This explains why in similar circumstances different people will have varying tolerance levels to stress and will react in different ways.

The above definition provides a basis for intervention and also provides several determinants. These in turn influence the actions available;
1. The actual situation itself can be changed
2. The perception of the situation can be altered
3. The actual ability of the individual to cope can be improved
4. The perception of the individual can be changed from believing they can't cope, to believing they can.

Although these broad definitions can be helpful, they can also lock down the issue of stress to particular situations, this is especially true in occupational stress. Based on initial research by Cox (1993) who suggested a hazard-based taxonomy based on job content and context, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) developed a set of draft standards for the management of stress in the workplace and set up a series of workshops following which a practical taxonomy of stressors was proposed:
- *Demands* (workload, workload patterns and the working environment)
- *Control* (how much say a person has in the way they do the work)
- *Support* (encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues)
- *Relationships at work* (promoting positive working practices to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour)
- *Role* (whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that the person does not have conflicting roles)
- *Change* (how organisational change -large or small - is managed and communicated in the organisation)
- *Culture* (the way in which the organisations demonstrate management commitment and have procedures which are fair and open)

However, in the subsequent work on the standards, the separate topic of culture was dropped because it underpins the approach to each of the others. Thus aspects of culture are incorporated into each of the remaining six (Mackay, Cousins et al. 2004).

Stress and Mass Higher Education
Over the years there have been many policy changes within Higher Education. Part of this change has been the advent of mass education in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the tensions and problems that are created by a system still based on an elite model.

> *"The problems faced by mass Higher Education arise from a system which has become mass in its size but remains elite in its values. The recent external changes of numbers, structures, finance and governance have not been matched by appropriate internal changes of values, purpose and activity"* (Wagner 1995).

This can be seen numerically as HEIs have accommodated a tripling of student numbers in the last quarter of a century while assimilating a fifty percent reduction in funding received per student (McCaffery 2008). This evidently has a direct impact on the role of the academic, in terms of the scope of their workload and hours worked; the changing environment that this creates may also produce added stress. Couple this with issues relating to job security, which are inevitable in a sector where funding cuts are evident, and some level of stress is like to be apparent. A proposition supported by the work of Gillespie et al (2001) who found that insufficient funding and resources, work overload and job insecurities were amongst the factors that caused staff working in HEIs the most stress. Self-reported psychological wellbeing is strongly linked to objective measures of university staff-wellbeing, namely investment income, student-staff ratios. Gillespie et al (2001) and Winefield, et al. (2001) suggest that financial difficulties imposed on universities indicate serious consequences for the psychological well-being of their staff. A similar effect is likely to occur in the UK as the impact of a new Government and subsequent financial cuts in higher education become inevitable.

When considering occupational stress it is wise to recognise the impact of the environment in which the organisation exists and the personal circumstances of the individual. It is argued that stress is cumulative and from this perspective, the individual in their work role is rarely able to decouple occupational stress from other sources of stress outside the workplace. Taking perceived ability to cope with demand as one example, an individual who in the past has been able to cope with pressures and demands at work, may experience stress by those same demands if a significant disruption outside of the work context. This highlights interplay between two dynamics; a depleting of the psychological 'reservoir' of an individual and the disruption of foundational goals and values rooted in the individual's conscious or sub-conscious (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). Therefore when considering stress in an academic environment, the relationship between the factors below require specific attention:

1. The pure 'occupational' aspects of the six stressors identified by the HSE
2. The environment within which the employing organisation exists
3. The individual both in terms of their perceptions of the demands and ability to cope in the work context as well as the non-work circumstances that may be impacted on the psychic reservoir and their goals / values.

Mentoring
Mentoring is an intense and powerful one-on-one developmental relationship (Wanberg et al 2003) which supports and encourages learning (Parsloe & Wray 2004). It is essentially a learning relationship and it is purpose is to help an individual realise and work towards their personal and professional goals, in order to enhance their career potential (Connor & Pokora 2007). Mentoring is proposed to provide support, build self-confidence and competencies and improv working relationships (Jamissen & Phelps 2006:302).

Research has shown that mentoring can help to enhance an individual's potential in the workplace, increase their job satisfaction, enhance their career opportunities and income levels. It also results in organisational effectiveness and improvements in

commitment have been found. To this end, mentoring is seen as an excellent development tool and effective support mechanism to help adjustment to changing times (Cranwell-Ward et al 2004). Despite Burke & McKeen's study in 1997 (as cited in Gibson 2004) expressing caution about expecting these outcomes to occur merely as a result of mentoring, many businesses still see mentoring as having a high impact on individual, team and organisational outcomes. Anderson (1987 as cited in Brooks & Sikes 1997:28) defines mentoring in UK education as 'a nurturing process in which a more skilled or more experienced person, serving as a role model, teaches, sponsors, encourages, counsels, and befriends a less skilled or less experienced person for the purpose of promoting the latter's professional and/or personal development. Therefore, mentoring is increasingly 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).

As discussed, the mentoring literature suggests that mentoring provides benefits which may offer a buffer against the challenges experienced by employees facing organisational change (Cranwell-Ward et al, 2004; Viator, 2001). Mentoring is thought to encourage employees to feel appreciated by the organisation: mentors feel their knowledge and experience is valued by their peers, while mentees feel 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; Elass & Raston, 1989; Kram, 1985). 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; Thomas 2009). 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).

Perceived Stress in HEIs and Mentoring
Although far from exhaustive, there has been research into mentoring in academic settings (c.f. Ehrich & Hansford, 2008; Marshall, Adams & Cameron,1998; Perna, Lerner & Yura,1995 to name a few). Much of this research has been carried out in relation to the mentoring of new staff and has focused primarily on the mentoring of lecturers. This literature suggests that mentoring provides general information, knowledge on how to survive in the workplace, assistance with promotion, gaining a permanent contract and pursuing career opportunities (Harper et al, 2010; Marshall et al, 1998). Most of this research is founded on common interest (Perna et al, 1995) and common research fields (Perna et al, 1995; Blackburn, Chapman & Cameron 1981). Mentoring also helps increase the self esteem and self confidence of academic staff (Tracy, Jagosi, Starr & Tarbell, 2001). Although some research questions the implementation of formal mentoring in higher education (Enrich & Hansford, 2008), many positive effects of formal mentoring have been found within this setting (Cureton, 2009; Jones 2008).

Focusing specifically on the changing academic environment, Cureton, Green & Meakin (2010) identified four key areas where university employees have reported that a formal mentoring scheme helped them. These areas are skill and strategy development, contact with others, emotional support and the opportunity for reflection. They propose that mentoring can provide the opportunity for occupational development, filling skills deficits that occur due to changing delivery demands, but most importantly it allowed staff to make sense of themselves in their role within the

institution. The research shows that mentoring also provides contact with others, the opportunity to create networks which not only encourage a feeling of belonging, but also provides support, information, the opportunity to discuss issues that arise and to gain a wider perspective of available working styles. Mentoring also enhances opportunities for receiving and giving peer support. Therefore, involvement in mentoring allows people to feel better equipped to support others outside of the scheme.

Taking these points into consideration, it seems clear that mentoring can facilitate an individual's understanding of their ability to influence their situation. The process helps an individual to re-frame their perception of the situation and provides the opportunity to identify new coping strategies that can be employed. It also helps the individual re-frame their perception of their existing coping mechanisms and how those apply to the situation. This provides mentees with a greater feeling of autonomy in their situation. Bearing in mind the discussion, above, relating to the generation of stress in the academic environment, it is immediately obvious that overlaps exist between the cause of work-based stress and the benefits that mentoring provides.

Aims of the research
The aim of this research programme is to understand the association between stress and being involved in a mentoring relationship within a higher education context. For this study, the University-wide staff mentoring scheme was selected. This is a programme which currently has trained mentors and mentees from all occupation groups in the University. Through a variety of methods this research considers whether mentoring impacts on work-based stress in HE and how. Specifically, this research aims to explore whether having a mentor helps reduce stress and/or better negotiate work related stressors. Also this research aims to address how providing mentoring positively or negatively impacts on a mentor's level of work related stress.

Methodology & Results
Taking a social constructionist stance, this research implements retrospective and prospective research design and utilises both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The research is gathered through three separate data collection methods, using a multi-method approach (Saunders et al 2003). Exclusive reliance on one method of gathering data may lead to bias and distortion of the results, and so a multi-method approach to gathering this data was used. This helped to triangulate the data gathered (Cohen and Manion 1989), reduce any skew in the results and therefore helped to maintain validity and reliability of the results. The methodology and results for each study will be outlined throughout.

Methodology Study One
Aim: To provide a qualitative evaluation of whether involvement in the staff mentoring scheme helps employees cope with stress provoking situations in a positive manner.

Design and procedure: Retrospective experiential data has been collected using a semi structured, open ended questionnaire which elicited respondents' views, thoughts and comments about involvement in an organisational mentoring scheme and how this impacts on the coping mechanisms utilised by participants. The questionnaire was disturbed by email to all matched mentors, matched mentees and trained mentors involved in the scheme (N=165). 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.

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 mentee from academic, research and administrative backgrounds. Thus the sample comprised of, both 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 combine and catalogue related patterns into sub-themes. Themes, the bringing together of components or fragments of an idea or experience (Taylor & Bogdan, 1986) were inductive and were, semantic, or explicit, within the discourse. Themes that emerge from the participants' responses were pieced together to form a comprehensive picture of the collective experience (Constas, 1992) of the impact of staff mentoring on self reported stress in the work place.

Results Study One
Several themes arose from the thematic analysis, one of which relates to the management of stress. The theme contained seven distinct subthemes, which were feeling supported, the opportunity to discuss work related difficulties, improved professional relationships, not feeling isolated, being listened to, increased confidence in the workplace and self reflection.

Both mentors and mentee reported that being involved in the staff mentoring scheme allowed them to feel supported in the workplace. Some comments are below;

> *'Being mentored has made me feel valued and supported'*
> *(Mentee)*
>
> *'I found the experience [of being involved in the scheme]*
> *so supportive and nurturing' (Mentor)*

In particular, scheme participants reported that they found mentoring to be a supportive experience during time of pressure such as when managing stressful workloads and troublesome times.

> *'One session can make a big difference to someone at a*
> *particularly troublesome times' (Mentor)*
>
> *'In this fast pace of teaching and learning and all that*
> *accompanies life in the University's workforce, I found*
> *the opportunity to meet with like minded people very*
> *supportive and stimulating' (Mentor)*

Mentee further commented that the opportunity to discuss difficulties that they encounter in the workplace has beneficial effects for them.

> *'I have been able to discuss elements of my job or any*
> *problems I have found' (Mentee)*
>
> *'Sharing issues with someone that listens and provides*
> *honest, constructive feedback helps' (Mentee)*

> *'[Mentoring provides] a clear picture of why I face the challenges that I do (Mentee)*

Mentees also reported that having someone who listened when they felt stressed was helpful.

> *'He [my mentor] also listened and advised when I moved house and when I was feeling stressed' (Mentee)*

> *'My mentor was very calm and it helped to have someone to discuss things with' (Mentee)*

Both mentors and mentees proposed that being involved in mentoring relationships improved their professional relationships.

> *'[Mentoring] provides time and space to reflect on workload and managing relationships with colleagues and superiors' (Mentee)*

> *'It [Mentoring] has meant that I have been able to place a lens once more on how I interact with others' (Mentor)*

Of particular interest mentors believed that the improved relationships generated as a consequence of mentoring helped them to negotiate potentially difficult situations, in their own work situations.

> *'It has certainly improved my professional relationships, which has helped me in dealing with potentially difficult situations' (Mentor)*

Those involved in mentoring relationships also suggest that mentoring has helped them develop self awareness through the reflection that they engage in during their mentoring meetings. They feel that as a consequence of this, they are more equipped and more confident to cope with the demands of their work environment.

> *'I'm more thoughtful. I have frameworks to use, which make it easier to understand myself and my work' (Mentee)*

> *'It makes me reflect on what we do, and why, and that in itself builds my confidence in myself' (Mentor)*

> *'Reflection and confidence are key, and whenever there is a shortage of time for reflection, there is a resulting lack/damage to/break down in confidence' (Mentee)*

Specifically in relation to confidence, mentees comment that having a mentor has lead to an increase in confidence in the workplace.

> *'[Mentoring has lead to] an increased level of confidence' (Mentee)*

> *'As a result of mentoring I feel much more confident' (Mentee)*

Finally, mentee report that their involvement in mentoring relationships has lead to them feeling less isolated in their working environment.

> *'All in all, it is nice to know that as a new starter I'm not on my own' (Mentee)*

> *'Mentoring provides someone I can turn to for help, who I know is there for me. I don't feel isolated now' (Mentee)*

In summary, the key results of study one show that mentoring allows both mentors and mentees to feel supported, particularly in times of pressure and stress. Both parties also reported that mentoring helped them develop their professional relationships further and also raised their self awareness through engaging in ongoing reflection together. Mentees also commented that they had developed increased confidence through mentoring and generally feel less isolated in the workplace. These findings suggest that there are a number of ways that mentoring helps staff feel supported in the work place. However, there is little evidence to link this support to the elevation of stress. Research to support the direct relationship between and work-based stress in HE is necessary.

Methodology Study Two
Aim: To provide a quantitative and qualitative evaluation of how being a mentor or mentee impacts on work related stress.

Design and procedure: Retrospective survey data has been collected using a mixed methods questionnaire. This utilised a likert scale and semi structured questions. The questionnaire asked participants to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 how strongly they agreed that being involved in a mentoring relationship positively impacted on work based stressors identified in the University's stress audit (University of Wolverhampton, 2008). They were also asked to comment on how mentoring impacted on their stress levels.

The questionnaire was disturbed by email to mentors and mentees in one particular School of the University. Again, 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.
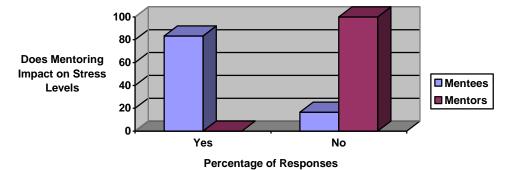
Participants: A randomised sample of responses from 10 scheme participants was gained. The respondents included trained and matched mentors and matched mentees, who were academic or administrative staff.

Analysis: A quantitative analysis utilising descriptive statistics was implemented to analyse the data from the likert scales.   A thematic analysis of data was conducted on data collected through the semi structured questions.

Results Study Two
Quantitative Analysis: All the mentors surveyed believed that mentoring had not impacted on their levels of work based stress. The majority of mentees reported that mentoring had impacted on their stress levels.

Chart One: Responses relating to whether mentoring has impacted on individuals' levels of stress.

Mentees reported that mentoring positively affected all work-based stressors. More staff reported an impact on prioritising work, feeling supported in the work place, control over the demands placed on them in the work place, their interactions with others, friction with colleagues, problem solving, relationships colleagues and the level of support they receive.

Mentors felt that mentoring had impacted on aspects of their work life that are stressful; in particular, the majority of mentors believed that mentoring had affected their relationships with colleagues and their interactions with others in their work environment.
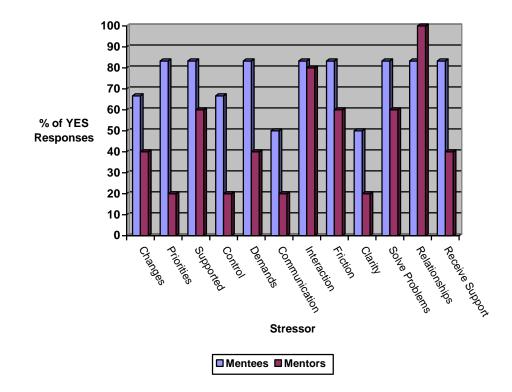
Chart Two: Responses relating to the impact of mentoring on work based stressors.

Qualitative Analysis: Both mentors and mentees were asked how mentoring helped them in the work-place and how it helped them deal with work-based stress. Mentees related these questions directly to how mentoring helped them deal with their work based stresses. Three themes arose from this data which revealed that mentors believed mentoring helped them build strategies to deal with stressful situations:

> *It [mentoring] has helped me deal with work related stress. It has provided me with coping strategies*

Mentoring provided mentees with the opportunity to reflect on stressful situations:

> *Previously I plodded on alone. Having a mentor offered me an opportunity to reflect in a structured way and then make decisions in a supported environment*

Also mentoring positively affected mentees confidence levels.

> *If you have the right mentor/mentee relationship and dependant on your goals within that relationship it can improve your confidence: the ability to communicate your frustrations become easier.*

> *It [mentoring] has given me confidence and I perform much better because of it.*

Mentors discussed the first question in terms of how mentoring helped them generally. They discussed the second question in terms of how mentoring has helped them and how this could help them deal with work-based stress in the future. Again three themes were generated by the data which suggested that mentors, like mentees, believe that mentoring provides the opportunity to reflect:

> *By mentoring my colleague I reflect on the ways in which I relate to others on a day-to-day basis.*

Mentoring also provided mentors the chance to develop strategies:

> *I applied the strategies I discussed with my mentee to my own situations*

However, mentors also stated that mentoring helped them feel valued.

> *The mentee listened to what I had to say and valued it. This made me feel I had made a difference and that what I did with them was worthwhile.*

Therefore in summary, the key results of study two show that all mentors and mentees who responded feel that mentoring has had a positive impact on their professional practice through providing coping strategies, the opportunity to reflect and ultimately makes both parties feel valued. Most of the mentees felt that mentoring had positively impacted on their work-based stress. Mentors reported that the mentoring relationship did not impact directly on their levels of stress. In one way this is positive, as mentoring appears not to create additional stress for mentors. However, mentors did not feel that mentoring had directly reduced work-based stress; they did, however, suggest that mentoring has the potential to reduce stress in the work place.

Methodology Study Three
Aim: To provide a quantitative and qualitative exploration of how the positive elements of mentoring, identified in our previous studies, support staff against work-based stress.

Design and procedure: Retrospective quantitative survey data was collected from mentors and mentees using a likert scale and qualitative dara was collected from mentees using semi structured questions. Further qualitative data was collected through a focus group with mentors, where semi-structured questions were asked to help the group clarify and explore the possible impact of mentoring on their work-based stress levels and that of their mentees stress levels.

As before, the questionnaire was distributed by email to all mentors and mentees involved in the staff mentoring scheme. Participants were provided with information about the themes identified in the previous study and asked to rate how strongly they agreed with these themes. Mentees were invited to comment on their experience of how mentoring impacted on work related stress. These comments were returned either by email, or by internal post should they wish to remain anonymous.

The focus group occurred during a mentor supervision session and lasted for 45 minutes. The group's comments were recorded and transcribed. Mentors were asked to discuss their thoughts about the results from the questionnaires. The topics covered were the impact of mentoring on stress, the opportunity to reflect, development of strategies and feeling valued.

Participants: Questionnaire - A randomised sample of responses from 44 (18.4%) of the scheme participants was gained, which included 21 mentors and 23 mentors. The respondents included trained mentors, matched mentors and matched mentee from academic, research and administrative backgrounds.
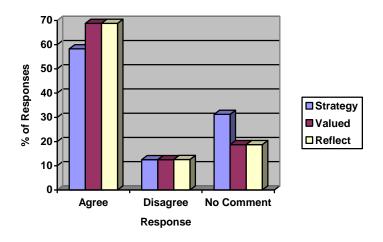
The focus group - A randomised sample of responses from 7 mentors who had chosen to attend staff supervision session on mentoring and stress was gained. The respondents were trained and matched mentors, 4 of whom were also mentees as well as mentors.

Analysis: A quantitative analysis utilising descriptive statistics was implemented to analyse the data from the likert scales. A thematic analysis of data was conducted on data collected through the semi-structured questions and the focus group.
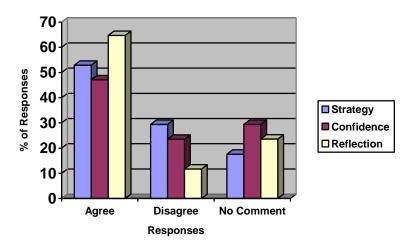
Results Study Three
Quantitative results from questionnaires: The findings of this study partly disagree and partly agree with the findings of study two. The findings disagree with previous findings because mentors suggest that mentoring positively affects their work-based stress levels. The findings agree with past research findings as mentors suggest that the previously identified benefits of mentoring can help them cope with work-based stress. It had previously suggested that these could help however the evidence that they do help was missing. Of the 21 mentors who responded 56.25% agreed that mentoring had helped them deal with work based stress through helping them explore new coping strategies. 12.5% of mentors disagreed with this statement and 31.25% did not comment. When asked if feeling valued help mentors cope better with work based stress 12.5% disagreed, 68.75% agreed and 18.75% did not answer. On being asked if mentoring helped with worked based stress by providing time to reflect, 12.5% of mentors disagreed, 68.75% agreed and 18.75% did not answer.

Chart Three: Mentors Responses to the Likert Scale Questions

Of the 23 mentees who responded to the questionnaire 58.8% agreed that mentoring had positively impacted on their work related stress. When asked if mentoring had helped with work based stress through providing new coping strategies 29.4% disagreed, 52.9% agreed and 17.6% made no comment. 23.5% of mentee disagreed that mentoring positively impacted on stress as it raised their confidence to cope with situations, 47.1% agreed and 29.4% did not answer. When asked if mentoring impacted on stress by providing time to reflect, 11.7% disagreed, 64.7% agreed and 23.6% did not answer.

Chart Four: Mentees Responses to the Likert Scale Questions

It seems clear that over half of the mentors and mentees who responded agreed that mentoring gave them strategies to cope and opportunities to reflect. Slightly less of mentees than mentors reported a positive impact of mentoring on their confidence to cope. However, more than half of mentors agreed that feeling valued positively impacts on work-based stress.

Qualitative responses from mentee questionnaires: Mentees mentioned how mentoring positively impacted on stress because it provided a wider perspective. However the definition of this perspective was diverse and included the provision of bigger picture view, putting things into perspective and providing different

perspectives. Putting things into perspective also included the demystification of issues. Mentees further commented that mentoring impacted on stress through increasing their confidence to say no. This included examples of being able to say no to extra work when under pressure or going along with things that generated stress. Other mentees commented that mentoring provided time away from stressful situations with someone who is uninvolved with their particular work situation.

Results from mentor focus groups: The focus group encouraged mentors, and mentors who are mentees, to discuss their experiences of mentoring and its impact on stress. Therefore, mentors discussed mentoring from their experience of being a mentor and some from them also from their experiences of also being a mentee. Initially, mentors discussed the difference between specific and general reasons for stress and how mentoring impacts on each of these.

> *As a mentor, it's about perceptions and coping strategies. Mentee has never once mentioned the word 'stress'. The situation maybe not be out of control. Or perhaps the mentee is coping with the situation. Perhaps she's already resilient?'*

Mentors discussed in detail how role ambiguity impacts on stress. It was felt that not being able to speak to your Line Manager causes an ongoing stressful situation. This is especially poignant when a job, particularly within HEIs, can be seen as very reactive day to day. Mentors felt that mentoring meetings provided time away from the role and this is helpful. This was also mentioned by mentees in their qualitative responses.

> *'As a mentee, it's about; role ambiguity, uncertainty, not being valued. Mentoring is being able to off load in confidence and having the space and time to talk about it. Mentoring provides the time to be able to share views outside of your department. Mentoring has helped me to move on and to put things into perspective. It is valuable to be able to get things off your chest and it is helpful to speak to someone completely objective.'*

> *'I think we are going through institutional stress at the moment. Large proportion of staff are having similar feelings. Not just this institution; it's a national issue – increased profile of people with stress. Just shows how important the dialogue is. Mentoring offers that escape.'*

The key results of study three show mentoring has provided coping strategies, the opportunity to reflect and contributed to feelings of being valued. Particular mention was made of the usefulness of sharing differing perspectives, saying no, issues with role ambiguity and how helping others can aid self reflection for mentors.

The focus group was a valuable opportunity to find out further detail about the responses in all the studies mentioned so far. The comments made revealed interesting information in relation to reflection, feeling valued and building strategies to cope with stressful situations. There the comments from the data collected will be looked at in more detail here.

1.   Mentoring gives me an opportunity to reflect on stressful situations:
The opportunity that mentoring provides to reflect was appreciated. Mentors felt that helping mentees reflect and process problems benefit the mentor. This occurs as they draw parallels to their own particular problems and issues. In this context, comments also suggested that mentoring sessions creates an area of shared experience, where the mentor not only shares their experiences with the mentee, but they also relate this to their own experiences. Mentoring is reported to provide opportunities for mentees to unload particular issues and gives them the space and time to reflect outside of their immediate role and colleague base. In doing so, mentoring helps provide a new perspective into situations and this helps reduce the perceived stress that the situation carries for the mentee. In particular, the mentors felt that mentoring provided the opportunity to:

> '*talk about the relationship*'

> '*Redirect your thinking through talking with others*'

> '*Is it reflection in the moment or after? Both. The mentor log helps with the after.*'

It was felt that having the opportunity to reflect helps both mentor and mentee in considering both their own situations. Comments made around this belief included:

> '*Also the relationship helped me learn new things through my mentee*

> '*Can reflect on mentees situation and use it to think about own situations*'

> '*Hearing that others are in same situations*'

> '*Share significant experiences*'

> '*Dialogue helps them and you at the same time*'

Reflection allows the mentoring pairs to see the positive aspects of a situation and aids consolidation through confirmation of ideas, thoughts and perspectives.

> '*Helped me to appreciate and value what I have rather than dwelling on the negatives*

> ''*Articulating all these ideas, it can help feedback and can 'concrete-ise' things*'

> '*Work life balance – when giving advice and talking through ideas, helps to put own thoughts and work-lIfe balance into perspective*'

> '*Can take time out to consider, evaluate and reflect*'

Mentors also added that reflection gives an opportunity to empathise or show compassion, such as being in similar situations or sharing experiences.

'If as a mentor you have had similar situations and have come through – you can have compassion and show it did work. Can give the mentee hope that they can get through too'

'Many elements of stress are universal as they relate to underlying interest and needs – makes it easy to relate and empathise on situations that may be challenging at the time'

2. Mentoring helps me to feel valued:
Mentors felt valued due to their mentoring activities. They commented that:

'Being a part of a mechanism that needs to be available within the Uni – to offload/can support others'

It is valuable especially as this allows them to be a

'Benefit to [other] individuals'

Mentors felt that being a mentor helped them feel valued for a variety of reasons. They felt that seeing that their actions help someone and seeing an immediate benefit of what they have said and done, has encouraged this feeling.

'It's rewarding to see that your guidance really helped someone – can visibly see their response to how well a particular approach worked'

'It's one to one. Un-like other situations at work, you can see a more intimate, immediate, visible and tangible impact from your efforts as a mentor'

They suggested that this was evident when:

'Using feedback – directly in terms of the end of the mentoring session, plus seeing what has happened since last session'

'You see the rewards'

'Sharing of the outcomes'

Mentors also report that they feel valued because mentees say that they appreciate and value the mentors input.

'I can feel valued. Am told by mentee that it is valued – you rarely get told in other aspects of the job, that 'you did a good job on that'

'Appreciation of time given and received'

'The feeling that you have helped and they are grateful for the help'

'Mentee seems to appreciate the sessions/time'

Mentors highlighted specific parts of the relationship that allowed the feeling of being valued to arise, including being actively listened to by the mentee. They commented that it was:

>*'Good to be actively listened to'*

specifically when this related to:

>*'using my own skills and knowledge to help others'*

3.   Mentoring helps to build strategies to deal with stressful situations
Mentors and mentors who were also mentees commented that building strategies helped cope with stress for several reasons. These included that:

>*'Two brains dealing with one situation' was useful*

>*'Using my knowledge to help mentee to get through his problems to understand what can change'*

Mentors also found that by helping others, it helped them deal with their own situations better:

>*'Helping others to find solutions to their problems helps me to develop strategies for my own situation'*

>*'Mentoring helped me to deal with and develop my own strategy to cope with personal problems in a calm and manageable way'*

Mentors also report that mentoring helped them as mentors and mentees to recognise their work related boundaries, helped them gain some distance and encouraged them not to take on other's stresses. They commented that:

>*'Being distanced from the situation allows me to problem-solve more readily in relation to mentee and so helps me with strategies for myself'*

>*'Being clear about the boundaries. Allow time to step back (more reflection)'*

>*'[understanding] what's my stress, what's your stress? Some people run around like headless chickens'*

They further felt that helping others recognise their stressors helps them to also deal with stress:

>*'Understand and reinforce that some stressful situations may not be able to be controlled or within your power to change. i.e. stress over the things you can control, not the things you can't/understand what you can change and what you can't change.'*

>*'Looked at working within staff teams that do not seem to be functioning well – how to approach/cajole/begin conversations to alleviate stressful situations'*

> *'We've looked at assertiveness techniques in order to overcome stressful situations – how to say no'*

> *'Can look at a number of strategies – share with mentee to see which ones 'fit' with them'*

Mentors suggest a number of strategies to deal with stress that they have discussed or acquired when mentoring another. Some key strategies are utilising assertiveness techniques, prioritising work, breaking things down into smaller chunks to make dealing with them easier, raising awareness of where stress arises, and protecting work life balance by taking lunch breaks:

> *'Not absorbing others stress'*

> *'Stress comes from other people – you realise that their pressure is being put on you. Need to ask more questions and don't take on others stress'*

> *'Timelines, prioritising - seeing what can be done in the time'*

> *'Communication – not letting things get on top of you and fester'*

> *'Protect self; work life balance – take lunch breaks'*

> *'Take things one at a time'*

> *'Break things down into bite size chunks to be addressed more easily'*

Discussion

The purpose of this research study was to understand the association between stress and being involved in a mentoring relationship within a higher education context; ultimately to consider whether mentoring impacts on stress and if so, how. Specifically, this research aimed to explore whether having a mentor helped a mentee reduce stress and/or better negotiate work related stressors and also how being a mentor positively or negatively impacts on a mentor's level of work related stress.

So does mentoring have an impact on stress and how?

It seems clear from the results that mentors and mentees report that mentoring has a positive impact on reducing their stress levels. It seems that having the opportunity to discuss work-related issues and to gain support from an interested other, helps mentees manage their stress levels (Sosik & Godshalk 2000). The mentees report that it is good to feel listened to, particularly if their line manager is not available, and to gain a different perspective on issues which leads to them feeling less isolated and less unsure of their role. Both parties report that being involved in mentoring helps them to develop their professional relationships, their self confidence (Tracy, Jagosi, Starr & Tarbell 2001) and their self awareness through ongoing reflection. Mentors report that through helping others, they can reconsider their own situations and also develop their own coping strategies for potentially difficult situations further. This concurs with the study of mentor's perceptions by Lopez-Real and Kwan (2005) at the Faculty of Education at the University of Hong Kong. Through questionnaires and interviews, they discovered that the majority of mentors reported that their

professional development had been enhanced through bring involved with their mentees. This primarily came about through their own self reflection and from direct/indirect learning from their mentees. Mentoring is often referred to as a two-way process (Clutterbuck 2004) and it seem clear from these results that many of the benefits are apparent for both parties.

Our results show that, within the University studied, mentoring has a positive impact for both mentee and mentor in relation to their work-related stress levels. Through the support from one another, they seem to develop an increased self confidence and thus an increased ability to cope. Within the focus groups, mentors discuss the changing and difficult environment within HE and one mentor even states that 'I think we are going through institutional stress at the moment' and reinforces the fact for mentoring to 'offer that escape.' This 'escape' helps the mentees to feel valued (Carnall 1990) and helps the mentors to see the value in helping others (Clutterbuck 2008). According to the UCU members stress survey (2009), improvements that members within in post-16 education feel could help to tackle the rising stress levels include feeling valued and trusted, among other changes needed to the physical environment. Mentoring is clearly a tool that can aid this.

The mentees and mentors studied also discussed practical techniques that are used to help them: these range from giving feedback, sharing frameworks, sharing knowledge, assertiveness techniques, timelines, prioritising, taking lunch breaks, encouraging work-life balance and to break things down into bite size chunks. A few mentors discuss the importance of the fit to the individual and also the importance of recognising that not all stressful situations can be controlled. Apart from the supportive and practical advice/guidance level of mentoring, the key technique that seems the most helpful for mentors and mentees in managing their mentoring relationships and ultimately their stress levels is the art of reflection (Cureton et al., 2010).

Some Thoughts on Mentoring and Reflection
Reflection is a natural and familiar process (Daudelin 1996) and is a term used for learning from experience (Kolb 1984; Harrison et al 2005). It is a way of keeping an eye on oneself, to openly discuss our thoughts and/or actions in order to critically evaluate everything that we think and do (Brockbank & McGill 1998). Schon 1987 sees reflective practice as 'professional artistry.'(Schon 1987) Schon 1987 (as cited in Newton 2004:155) goes on to say that it is 'well established that in the world of professional practice to make sense of what we see, learn, hear and experience one needs to be able to reflect in and on practice.' Brockbank and McGill (1998) states that when engaging in reflection we can discover our limitations and gain new insights into ourselves. Both Schon and Brockbank and McGill go on to say that in order to encourage full reflection on learning, reflection-on-action dialogue with another person would help to promote more critical debate. They state that without the interaction brought about by this dialogue, critically reflective learning may not happen. Biggs (2003) reinforces this by suggesting that the 3 key sources of information for reflection come from; our own reflections, the people on the receiving end i.e. learners/clients themselves and 'informed advice from a colleague in the role of critical friend' (Pg 68). It is this dialogue with others which is 'essential to learning generally and to reflective learning specifically' (Terrion & Philion 2008:585) It is the process of making what we learn, make sense. (Harrison et al 2005)

So it is clear that reflection is a useful, personal activity but that it is something that is best shared with others, in order to gain a different perspective and to ultimately aid further learning from within oneself. As already discussed, mentoring is an intervention which provides an opportunity for a learning conversation (Alred et al

1998); to share experiences, to discuss differing views, to ascertain meaning, to encourage reflection and to enable learning from these experiences. The mentoring relationship encourages both parties to engage in critical reflection on practice; deconstructing/looking backwards and constructing/looking ahead (Harrison et al 2005:289).

Barnett (1995) says that reflection is the catalyst for developing mentees autonomy and ability to solve problems for themselves. These studies demonstrate that reflection has been the catalyst for developing the thinking, learning and coping strategies for both mentees and mentors. They have also demonstrated the importance of reflection for both the mentees and the mentors, as it is the starting point for sharing differing perspectives, for sharing learning and for developing each other.

So in short, the mentoring programme used for these three studies, seems to fit within the contemporary definition of mentoring mentioned earlier (Jamissen & Phelps 2006), where the focus is on providing support, building self-confidence and improving working relationships. By focussing on these key elements and encouraging reflection, the mentors seem to help the mentees reduce their levels of stress and/or better negotiate work related stressors. Also, being a mentor within this process seems to positively impact on a mentor's level of reflection and their work related stress levels too.

Within the context of this case study, the results seem to show the importance of using mentoring as a way of helping staff deal with stressors found in the ever changing Higher Education environment and it seems that reflection is a key element of its success. 'Learning from experience and confronting change are challenging and require a high level of consciousness' (Jamissen & Phelps 2006:306) and it seems that mentoring, in this particular case, is a valuable vehicle to support learning at this higher level. Perhaps in these financially restricted times within HEIs, mentoring should be seen more positively as a cost effective way of helping staff deal with the pressure and stress that this sector creates.

Limitations/Thoughts for Future Study
On evaluating the efficacy of the research design chosen, it was felt that there were some strengths and areas to develop for future study. Strengths of the study were that the sample size was small and discreet, which allowed a thorough case study approach to be taken. Key questions, in relation to the overall research questions, were asked in both the questionnaires and cross-checked and built upon in the subsequent focus group. The focus group discussion was tape recorded which allowed for all details to be captured accurately and the whole research process was managed professionally and ethically.

This study has helped to raise awareness of the association between mentoring and stress within a particular University, but it was not the intention to create generalisations to be made about mentoring outside of this University context. It is hoped that other HEIs would investigate their own cause and effect relationships between mentoring and stress and that their results can be compared and contrasted with these. It would be interesting in the future to see if there are similar themes, not just for mentoring generally, but within this specific context.

Although it is felt that triangulation and respondent validation (Silverman 2005) were achieved as much as possible during this research, there are improvements that could be made for similar research to be carried out in the future; in terms of reviewing the research design, the data collection methods and ideas for improving

the response rate. Overall though, it is felt that this research was considered to be as reliable and valid as possible.

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