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Report to the Higher Education Academy Psychology Network Employability Grants Scheme: Career Mentoring Scheme for Psychology Students Sheffield Hallam University

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Career Mentoring Scheme for Psychology Students
Sheffield Hallam University

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A wide range of career options is open to Psychology graduates but many of these options require graduates to undertake further postgraduate study, extensive periods of work experience or voluntary work in order enter their professional career and secure training opportunities. Without work based learning modules or placements integral to the course, students can find work experience/shadowing difficult to secure as many organisations that offer relevant employment have strict conventions of confidentiality, security or client safeguarding measures. Where students don't have friends/family connections in the sector from whom they can seek advice, students' ability to get the valued first hand insights into the workplace are therefore restricted, making it difficult for them to make well informed decisions about their futures.

The Career Mentoring Scheme was therefore identified as a way to address this need. The Career Mentoring Scheme introduces a student to a career mentor i.e. a professional in a job role or organisation of interest to the student. Through a suggested 4 meetings with the mentor over the duration of the academic year it was envisaged that, amongst other potential outcomes, students would have chance to: broaden their network of professional contacts; get the valuable insights into a job role or organisation from the perspective of a practitioner/professional engaged in that sector; see how their psychology studies related to the workplace and develop strategies and feedback that would help them approach their career planning/job search with greater confidence.

SHU Careers Service has been running a generic Career Mentoring Scheme for a number of years initially under the Impact Programme which proactively targeted students from widening participation backgrounds, but the Psychology Network employability grant provided opportunity to develop the scheme specifically for psychology students, identifying appropriate mentors and modifying materials specifically for mentees from this subject area.

The approach taken to the mentoring scheme involved several 'phases': namely, recruiting the mentees; recruiting the mentors; training and induction for participants, matching and monitoring the partnerships, through to final 'celebration event' and evaluation of their experience.

Potential mentors were contacted/recruited using a variety of means including alumni networks, personal/professional contacts of the Psychology department's teaching team, local employers from organisations / career areas allied to psychology and also approaching organisations identified by the students as those organisations that appealed to them. Students were recruited from an advertisement posted on the course virtual learning site, and the general careers service vacancy website. Students applied to the scheme and were invited to an interview where their expectations and mentor preferences were discussed. There was then a mentoring induction event for both mentors and mentees where all participants received an introduction to the commitments of the programme and 'practised' some mentoring skills. The event was followed by informal networking where students could meet mentors - and potentially 'find a match' suitable to their own requirements.

Following their introduction to a mentor, it was up to the mentee to take the initiative for arranging the meetings, negotiating agendas and managing the partnership. As such, the way the student managed their mentoring relationship was as important for developing their personal and professional skills as the information and insights of the job role/organisation they gained from the mentor. The Mentee Journal was therefore developed to support this personal and professional development learning process.

The Mentee Journal introduces users to the mentoring process and contains an objective setting exercise which identifies some learning outcomes possible from mentoring that the student can prioritise dependent upon their own personal needs. This was considered a necessary resource as SHU's mentoring partnership was to be maintained over one academic year or a suggested four meetings, so it was essential for the mentee to have a very clear focus on what they wanted to achieve from the experience so they could maximise the value of the time they spent with their mentor. Not only does the personal objective priority checklist help the mentoring pair to negotiate realistic goals they will work on together, but it can also help them to monitor progress and evaluate their achievements at the end of the scheme.

The Mentee Journal also provides suggested agendas, action plans, confidentiality, professional etiquette guidelines and personal safety tips. It also includes personal development tasks on essential skills that enable the mentee to make the most of the experience e.g. time management, networking and learning styles questionnaires and provides an opportunity for the student to reflect upon the process of mentoring and record their personal and skill development. This task encourages mentees to value their mentoring experience as demonstrating evidence of skills, examples of which can be included with applications and interviews.

Although designed for SHU's particular model and timetable of mentoring, it is envisaged that the pack could be used in its entirety or particular resources could be selected by users. As such, it could be useful for any student arranging a mentoring partnership either through a formal university or course facilitated programme or independently for themselves.

In addition to the Mentee Journal, there is also a briefer complementary Mentor Essentials Pack that contains guidelines for mentors, suggested mentoring activities and resources such as agendas and action plans.

The project was a joint venture between Sheffield Hallam's Careers and Employment Service (Annette Baxter, Gillian Coyle, Ruth Holland) and Dr Stefanie Ashton Wigman, Lecturer Forensic Psychology from the Department of Psychology, Sociology and Politics. There was also significant input and feedback from Psychology students who had participated on the scheme especially Adam Papka, BSc Hons Psychology student and aspiring Organisational Psychologist.

After the pilot of this small course focused career mentoring scheme for psychology students, there has been significant interest from staff and students to continue to expand the programme and concerted efforts will begin soon to recruit mentors/mentees for the next academic year. Informed by feedback and suggestions from the students participating this year, the scheme coordinator is also planning to develop an online 'community' through a virtual learning Blackboard site where mentees can download supplementary resources, share experiences with each other and be informed of scheme developments.

The Mentee Journal and Mentor Essentials Pack are free to download for use by Psychology students or departments and feedback is welcome from students or staff about their use.

For further details about the project contact Annette Baxter at a.r.baxter@shu.ac.uk

References and Bibliography

For further investigation into mentoring as a topic you may like to refer to some of the following publications and research reports; a variety of relevant books and journal articles (listed below in alphabetical order by author surname):

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