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Reflections on learning from the pilot phase of the SHU Career Mentoring Scheme for Psychology students

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Reflections on learning from the pilot phase of the SHU Career Mentoring Scheme for Psychology students



Although a relatively small pilot Career Mentoring Scheme targeted at Psychology students, the learning outcomes were numerous and valuable.

Timing:

- According to those surveyed, the 2nd year was considered the most ideal time to embark upon career mentoring. The scheme generated an enthusiastic response from students of all years, however, with motivated first years wanting to join the scheme to 'set themselves out from the crowd' while they felt able; finalists wanting to 'do more/go above and beyond their course' to establish the networks and gain insights into the job sector so they could face the reality of the competitive job market confidently, and postgraduates who wanted to research specialist career paths. This emphasised the need to not restrict the scheme exclusively to 2nd years, but to keep the offer of the mentoring scheme open to students for whenever they feel ready/able to consider career planning.
- The scheme ran from October to April within the academic year, but some students felt unable to complete the commitments of the career mentoring scheme within the academic year and cope with the conflicting time pressures of their course and this extra-curricular activity. One possibility is to offer the scheme around the year on a 'roll on; roll off' basis and across summer vacations. This would add flexibility for the students and could mean more students would be able to take part and benefit from the experience with the same number of mentors. This arrangement could present problems for managing and monitoring the scheme, however, and would require holding several training/evaluation events at different times throughout the year and monitoring different start/end dates for different partnerships. It could also mean that mentors have no 'rest time' over the summer and could feel over committed.
- Having a fixed start and end time for the scheme, means there is a clear expectation of the level of commitment and also a 'closure' to the partnership. Several mentees/mentors agreed to keep in touch informally beyond the duration of the scheme but this was not expected and was individually negotiated.

Recruiting mentees

- Most students heard about the scheme from lecturers, Psychology students' Careers VLE Blackboard site or word of mouth from friends/housemates. Generic sources of publicity such as the careers service website, plasma screens around campus, noticeboards were less effective sources of publicity.
- To target second year students specifically, the career mentoring could be incorporated into specific core 2nd year professional practice module or promoted by lecturers at tutorials for this module.
- The recruitment process required students to complete an application form and attend an interview where their expectations were explored; where their career focus, prior research, communication skills, commitment and punctuality assessed, and their choice of mentor discussed. This could take up to an hour hence was a time consuming process but valuable for assessing the students' suitability for the scheme and 'setting the tone' of the programme by encouraging the students to focus on what they wanted to achieve from the mentoring experience. It also ensured that we had taken measures to 'vet' the students and were as confident as we could be that they were suitably motivated and committed to the scheme and would be appropriate representatives of the course/university within the professional community.
- Interviewing the students on a 1-1 basis for the mentoring scheme provided valuable insights into the students' career goals and aspirations. It also identified their limited knowledge of the options open to them related to their studies and revealed the lack of confidence many were feeling about their prospects and ability to pursue their career plans. Perceived barriers they felt they faced to achieving their goals included:
 - Time it takes to train
 - Cost
 - Competition gaining access to relevant postgraduate and professional training routes
 - Gaining relevant experience
 - Lack of real understanding about different job options and what they typically involve
 - Understanding of professional qualification routes and what is involved
 - Lack of contacts from whom to get realistic insights
 - Lack of confidence

This insight has helped to identify areas to focus upon within future career development activities within the course.

Recruiting mentors

- The methods used to recruit mentors included:
 - Asking academic staff to circulate details amongst their own professional networks
 - Speculatively approaching organisations identified by the students as those that interested them most
 - University Alumni Association sending out an email to Psychology graduates in the region
 - Using 'Groups' within LinkedIn networks of professionals to identify and target particular contacts
 - Advertising via the Psychology Network contacts email listing
 - Using the BPS directory to identify specialists and contacting professionals speculatively

Promoting the scheme to potential mentors through the department's established contacts/networks and making direct approaches to the organisations researched and selected by the students proved the most effective ways to promote/recruit mentors to the scheme. One mentor was identified and contacted using LinkedIn; social media may be a channel through which the scheme can be promoted worth exploring further in future.

- Students were also given the option of identifying/recruiting their own mentor. They were provided with suggested text and an electronic version of the leaflet about the scheme, and could email organisations they wanted to approach to request a mentor for themselves. This proved effective, and with our support enabled students to initiate contact with organisations for themselves and build their confidence to network. One student even stated that using the umbrella of the scheme 'added weight to the request' and successfully gave her a 'way in' to the organisation that she had been unable to arrange by approaching them independently herself.
- Undertaking a 'scoping' exercise to identify organisations the Department and Careers and Employment Service already had contacts with, organisations allied to Psychology in the region, and asking the students to research and identify organisations of particular interest to them was particularly useful exercise. This generated an extensive listing of local organisations and professional networking groups, charities and voluntary sector organisations and broadened our awareness of the local potential job market for psychologists in the local region.
- Mentors recruited to the scheme were met by the scheme coordinator, either individually or in small groups and ideally in their place of work. This was undertaken for a number of reasons:
 - to ensure we built an effective relationship with the mentor and enlist their support
 - to clarify the nature of the commitment and the expectations upon them
 - to be aware of the career paths and background of the mentor so we could make an appropriate 'match' to a mentee and/or help the students make informed choices about the mentors
 - to understand the expectations and personal motivations of the mentor for wanting to join the scheme - and those of their employing organisation - so we could make appropriate introductions.
 - meeting mentors, especially in their place of work, was also considered 'a safeguarding measure' so we could 'vet' mentors joining the scheme and assess work environment, access etc.
 - it also provided opportunity to promote additional services available to them/their organisation from the Careers and Employment Service and other university departments.
- Identifying and recruiting appropriate mentors proved challenging for a number of reasons:
 - many psychologists work as independent consultants - often from their own homes hence time and practical considerations were reasons they identified that prevented them from volunteering;
 - limited availability of professionals in some psychology specialisms within the Yorkshire region
 - Faculty colleagues had limited contacts within professional arena outside academia
 - psychologists working in secure units or with vulnerable clients were unable to provide access to their work environment for their mentee because of issues of security or confidentiality
 - current public sector funding cuts and uncertainty in organisational restructures were creating additional pressures for staff within target organisations meaning several organisations approached felt unable to volunteer staff time and offer on-going support to students
 - several of the specialist psychology departments/organisations already have established working relationships and provided placement support to students from other regional universities hence did not feel able to mentor students from SHU.
- In future, SHU Psychology graduates requesting references from their tutors will be asked if they would like to become a mentor and get involved in faculty employability initiatives for current students. This will help bring more alumni 'new recruits' into the scheme and also provide the graduates with valuable skills and experience that will enhance their own ongoing professional development.
- Mentees are also good ambassadors to the scheme and can help the scheme to grow

"I have great news in that I have attained some form of shadowing in the department and am extremely pleased. In addition, in the meeting with the head of department I recommended the mentor scheme and I believe D...(the mentor) is passing on your details to them, as they have expressed an interest in setting it up. I just thought I would inform you of the potentially good news, all there is to do now is wait!! If they are willing I am pleased to help initiate this move from a student perspective voluntarily if you require my input."

Matching

- The choice of the mentor is most important. In general, the mentoring experience was most positively evaluated by students when the mentor selected had a direct match to the career aspirations of the students.
- Having said this, the mentee's assessment of the suitability of their mentor and the basis for making the 'match' of mentor to mentee can be based upon many criteria not just career path

"I don't think it was as successful as I had hoped, due to the different areas of psychology that my mentor 'J...' worked in, and the areas I wish to pursue. Despite this she has helped me in any ways she can. I just wanted to say that the mentoring scheme was enjoyable for me, I was lucky to have met a lovely lady, who shared the same interests as me. She was able to offer me some guidance and support which has been helpful." (mentee)

"We are getting on well, we have a "West Indian' connection going on" (Mentor talking about the cultural aspect of the mentoring bond she had made with a mentee)

- Providing information on the background/experience of the mentor is helpful but it may be necessary to challenge assumptions if/when students are choosing a mentor. For example

"I feared that the mentor would not have enough experience as she was a recent graduate. In retrospect this was good as she had recently gone through the process so could give me a reality check eg how many applications I may need to make, accreditation and recognition of some courses."

- Students liked to be involved in the choice of mentor. In the selection interviews they had opportunity to shortlist and prioritise the mentors that most appealed to them, and the induction event also provided opportunities for mentors/mentees to meet informally and identify a mentoring partner that they would like to work with. Several of the mentees identified the mentor of their choice in this way and liked the opportunity to meet other mentors/students and the group induction event.
- Holding the training and networking event off campus at a mentor's offices (a very smart commercial law firm in the city centre) also helped to create the professional 'standard' and expectation of the scheme with students being introduced to business etiquette and work place culture amongst other things.
- Partnerships that did not last were mainly as a result of poor time management and the student not being able to cope with the pressures of work and study.

"unfortunately I had to pull out of the mentor agreement due to other commitments. I found it slightly too much with the RAF reserves and the MSc."

Although several worked around this by mentoring via email or keeping in touch by email rather than meeting - with one mentee saying she only managed 2 meetings with her mentor but emailed over 100 times!

- Face to face meetings were valued by the mentees as most effective for professional relationship building, especially when mentees gained access to the mentor's work place, had the opportunity to meet colleagues, attend events with their mentor, gain insights into the work culture and even shadow or gain work experience. One development for the future however, could be to explore other mechanisms by which mentoring pairs could work together. One student on our 'generic' career mentoring scheme, for example, has been 'meeting' his mentor in Dubai using Skype. This would have its limitations, but would obviously expand the range of mentors we could recruit to the programme, would mean there is less of a regional emphasis to the scheme and could help international students wanting to generate contacts back in their home countries.

Career Preparation

Feedback suggests that students were increasing their career awareness and career management skills:

"As a result of the partnership I learnt a lot about the reality of what happens after graduating e.g. how likely it is to get a job"

"I now have contacts/websites for suitable work experience that I can follow up when I'm back home."

"This is my first experience of networking outside my family circle"

"During the partnership with my mentor I learnt how to make my CV clear and what employers are looking for when assessing applications to pass on for interview. I found my mentor was extremely helpful."

"My advice to anyone thinking about joining this scheme is do it! It puts you in touch with the right people, gives you an invaluable insight into your chosen career and you might even get your foot in a few doors. Plus it will look good on your CV. You only get out of the scheme what you put into it so invest as much time as possible and it will pay off"

"It was useful to slowly develop my CV through figuring out what my transferable skills really are during my monthly meetings with my mentor, an Occupational Psychologist"

"I started to realise what my skills are through the reflective process we used and how I can market them to compete with 200,000 other students graduating this year!"

There benefit was not one sided, however, with many of the mentors also having gained from taking part:

"I was interested in helping my mentee to look at himself from a business point of view - what skills he can market- not just from a theoretical view. I enjoyed helping him learn more about the broad range of things an Occupational Psychologist can do and help him figure out what specialist areas he might want go into later."

"I helped my mentee looking forwards to his future by getting him to reflect where he is at now, how to become more self-aware; we did some MBTI and personality testing and re-jigged his CV so he can market himself more effectively now."

" As I graduated in Psychology from Hallam about 5 years ago I wanted to pass on to my mentee as much as I could from my experiences, because I know I found it very difficult when I was leaving Uni; you go into a limbo stage; not knowing what to do, how to get a job; the practicalities"

"It was really nice to meet my mentee; I found out a lot about how the course has changed since I left and it was good to think about my time here"

"The experience was very valuable to me, I learnt a lot from my mentee and vice versa, it gave me the opportunity to meet people I wouldn't usually get the chance to interact with and helped me realise some of my own strengths and weaknesses. It also gave me confidence to know I can be a mentor and was able to apply techniques which I'd previously learnt, but hadn't had the opportunity to put into practice."

"It has been very rewarding seeing the change in confidence of my mentee from the first meeting. It has given me a greater awareness of issues affecting my profession because of interesting discussion and research in the context of the mentoring scheme"

"It has been very enjoyable - particularly seeing advice turned into action!"

"From my meetings with my mentee I gained good practice in meeting new people and communication skills. My organisation also benefited because the HR manager had practice in conducting a mock interview"

And we benefitted too:

- As this project was jointly planned and run by the Careers and Employment Service and an academic with responsibility for 'careers liaison' within the Psychology Department, the impact of the scheme within the faculty, the interest generated from students and the ongoing sustainability of the scheme is far greater in the first year than where the Careers Service has offered the career mentoring scheme independently and without a nominated Faculty contact.

Annette Baxter, June 2011