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ABERYSTWYTH SIGNPOST MENTORING PROJECT

RESEARCH IN UNIVERSITY MENTORING

Mentoring is defined as the “social interaction between at least two people, in which the knowledge, experience or skills of one (or both) are shared through a process that leads to psycho-social or professional development – in the form of personal growth, self-awareness and understanding (insight)” (Law, 2013, p. 54). Research within HE settings has documented: (1) a decrease in students dropping out of university when engaging in mentoring (Collings, Swanson & Watkins, 2014), (2) an increase in performance and progression (Fox & Stevenson, 2006; Rodger & Tremblay, 2003); and a decrease in stress (Beecroft et al., 2006; Fried & Irwin, 2016).

The aim of the pilot study was to examine mentors’ and mentees’ experiences of the Signpost mentoring scheme, their reasons for taking part, benefits experienced, and areas for improvement.

12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with students (8 mentors/4 mentees) who had been involved in the Signpost peer mentoring scheme. The interviews lasted between 31-70 minutes. Recruitment was via the Signpost email group alias. The project was given ethical approval by the Department of Psychology’s Ethics Committee.

DATA ANALYSIS

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis. Three overarching themes and their sub-themes were identified (all quotes used have been anonymised), where meaning and experience of mentoring was constructed around (1) connecting and relating to each other, (2) investing in mentees, and (3) transforming the self:

(1) Connecting and relating to each other

This theme focused on the social aspects of mentoring that helped to provide a sense of belonging and developing relationships. It also included a recognition of the work of the mentors. This theme emerged from the following four sub-themes:

Guiding through shared experience

I kind of had that period myself, where I wasn’t really sure and I felt like well actually if I had someone to kind of talk it over with, like outside of my friends and my family, that would’ve been actually very helpful. So I kind of like have kind of my own experience and I thought it would be a good idea to use that to help others. [Jessica - mentor]

Feeling like a family

[talking of a previous experience of being mentored] So when I moved directly to different country, different culture, different language with a lot of difficulties, so I feel like I’m alone. But when I have support and you have a lot of people worry about you and asking and they send an email to check if everything is okay or no, so I feel home again, which is really good for me. [Sarah -mentor]

Meeting others and building friendships

I just really enjoyed doing it. I, because I’m very much a people person, I love meeting new people and with signpost I got to meet people from Ireland, from America, from Germany, from Denmark and from different places within England as well, and I found that really enjoyable. [Simon – mentor]

[on what students can get from mentoring].... A friendship, because I’ve become friends with mine and they’re cool. [Georgia – mentee]

Validating and acknowledging contribution

I really uh, said thank you a lot because I realised how much effort that my mentor was doing in their free time and everything. You could see that they really cared about how like um, that I improved I guess. I really tried my best over the time, to improve really. I’m glad that I can say that improved really. [Jack - mentee]

I just want to say that my mentor is great, he’s an absolute wonder, and he’s really helped me [Michelle – mentee]

(2) Investing in mentees

This theme focused on the ways in which mentors were invested in their mentees, ensuring they were providing a high level of support. It also reinforced the need for the scheme. This was constructed in the following five sub-themes:

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Giving something back

I sort of came into it thinking about my experiences from when I was a student at undergrad, and I sort of felt like it was a way of me, sort of, giving back and sharing my experiences and sort of trying to help other people and perhaps who weren't having the best times, because from my experience it's like, sometimes things aren't great. [Jessica – mentor]

Wanting the best for them

As you grow into the role you feel a lot more responsibilities and I want them to succeed and it is a more personal thing I'm hoping that through my mentoring they're going to do better at university or help cope with stress better, that sort of thing. [Chloe – mentor]

Recognizing the need for mentoring

And it makes me so happy that as of September 2017 to right now, every department has a mentoring scheme across campus. That makes me incredibly happy because I think there are a lot of people who are struggling and they don't even know it, or they don't want to admit. Whereas if they had someone to just chat with like once a month and they could just say 'ah, I've been feeling a bit down', then you can just discuss about it and then help them. [Simon – mentor]

I think it's really important whether they're a Fresher or a third year, but Freshers might have you know problems being homesick whereas third year uh, might be struggling with the stress of writing their dissertations and stuff, so um, I think it's really important to have someone there for everyone. And especially if you live away from home as well, university can be difficult. [Amy – mentor]

I think maybe people who need kind of external accountability, people who aren't maybe very self-motivated, or they lack in self-confidence and just need that someone to believe in them and build them up a little bit....not like hand-holding but you know that sort of support where you can be like 'you can do it' and 'here's how you can do it' and 'there's this type of support available'....I think it can just make a big difference having someone who's got faith in you because when you have a student being like 'I'm not meant to be at university, I'm not good enough, I can't handle anything', and then when you talk to them it's actually quite a small thing that's bringing them down and like a lot of the time I think that just having that conversation can put everything in perspective and make everything more manageable [Gwen – mentor]

Making things easier

Because some students they are like nineteen or twenty they are still very young and some, sometimes they feel afraid from other judgements or being judged by others,and so I try to make them feel comfortable and don't worry, all students face difficulties and the mentoring scheme is here to help everyone, not just you. And believe me there is a lot of students who have more issues than what you are facing and everything has solutions, so don't worry. So this I guess will help the student. [Sarah – mentor]

Being there

And so being able to talk to my mentor was really good because he's brilliant. He's absolutely brilliant he listens to everything, and he does just sort of go 'right, I think the best sort of thing you can do is this' and 'these are the things that are available at the uni and can help you out' and stuff. And yeah he just does, he stops and chats which is brilliant. [Michelle – mentee]

(3) The transformed self

It is within this theme that the benefits of the Signpost mentoring are explicit, as both mentors and mentees were able to articulate how the scheme had enabled them to improve, grow and develop and to identify positive change. This was constructed in the following three sub-themes:

Becoming independent

I guess it would be different because like the mentor doesn't tell me what to do for good work but tells me what I can do to improve my work. Not like actually saying that the answers but how to like uh, do better to do better work. So it's like I'm doing the work independently but I'm getting the help to do better work [Jack – mentee]

Enhanced skills and performance

I got myself more organised, it meant that I started actually paying attention to all of the things that I need to do and make sure that I was remembering that there were five tasks that I needed to do and I needed to do a quarter of them by Thursday or whatever [Michelle – mentee]

I definitely got like more interpersonal skills. I think I'm a better listener as well [Amy – mentor]

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Renewed belief in self

I know I've got more confidence now to do uh, better work. Definitely changed my opinion on myself, really because before I well, I felt like I was in a dead end basically. I didn't think I could improve or do better for myself. I literally thought I was like on my last legs but uh, now I've got that- got the drive, got that belief in myself I can believe I can do good work. But I wouldn't be if it wasn't for the help I got from mentoring, so, that's uh, a pretty important thing – to be able to believe in yourself.....I really think that it will last a lifetime probably, like going from uh, my approach to work and everything before to how I work now uh, it's made me a better student really. [Jack – mentee]

DISCUSSION

The data highlight that the Signpost mentoring scheme is highly beneficial. In addition to the perceived impact it has for building relationships and transforming the self, as shown in the above quotes, the data also show that:

- It is a lifeline for students on waiting lists to access professional services, such as doctor referrals or counsellors.
- Students don't always want to go to their tutors with specific questions/issues; mentoring can therefore be the difference to having a question answered, or struggling on with a lack of understanding.
- Students know that a peer mentor may be able to relate to them in ways that academic staff cannot.

Often the focus of a mentoring scheme is on the benefits to mentees, but this project has shown that mentors are also benefiting from participating in the scheme and gaining key transferable skills. These include:

- Meeting and speaking to a variety of people.
- Improved listening and communication skills.
- Learning to communicate and work more formally.
- Increased confidence and belief in ability to help others.
- Learning more about the university and what services are available.
- Help broaden their perspectives on individuals' concerns and in how they think.
- Thought more about their career and how a supporting role may feature within that.

In the participants' discussions, it was evident that they cared about the scheme and understood its value. Mentors wanted to do their best for their mentees, and mentees were very grateful to the time and support that had been

given to them. The scheme was seen as integral to their studies, performance and overall student experience.

With the increase in research documenting the importance of student mentoring schemes, Aberystwyth's Signpost mentoring scheme is essential for student retention, progression, stress reduction, development, and an increasing belief in self.

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I'm really glad I did it, really glad. It's helped me, increased my confidence in that I can do it because I think it's something that also now a lot of businesses are taking on in terms of being mentored by somebody, so I think it's good to be involved in something like this and I think that basically it's just been so rewarding, it really, really has, like you can't say it enough [laughs]. To be able to see somebody change through an experience and just to be able to go from one meeting where they're really nervous, they're homesick and worried and making new friends, stressing about their flat and then the next meeting or a couple of meetings after that they're like 'oh yeah, I've sorted my house for next year', saying things like that it makes you go 'good, you're happy' that's my, reward as well. [Alice - mentor]