Challenging the perceived value of alumni by developing a peer-mentoring scheme to support student learning

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While peer-assisted learning and peer-mentoring schemes are commonplace in HEIs, the use of alumni in supporting postgraduate students is a new and innovative development. This article describes a recent initiative at a post-92 university involving the use of alumni from the MBA programme to act as mentors for incoming part-time MBA students.

Utilising alumni to support the changing values in HE

Studies on alumni tend to focus on their ability to provide financial support and advocacy for the university, their contribution to performance and destinations data (Brennan et al., 2005) or their perceptions of the learning experience received (Stowe et al., 2012). Nonetheless, it has been shown that alumni can be useful in supporting new university students through a

formally established mentoring and support scheme (Wepner et al., 2009). It is this notion of peer mentoring and support of new students that yields tremendous opportunities for involving alumni, since they have already been through the university learning process and have therefore gained useful skills and knowledge to impart to new entrants. Consequently, peer mentoring can be especially useful in raising confidence levels among new entrants (Giordana and Wedin, 2010), and in helping students orientate to the academic rigours of study (Fugate et al., 2001; Loots, 2009).

Moreover, the interaction between students, staff and ex-students is particularly interesting. As Kay et al. (2010) note, the importance of the relationship between students (and ex-students) and the HEI is vital in changing values in HE, especially

with the contribution that students can make to improving educational experiences. Moreover, Staley (2011) feels that given the changing contemporary HE landscape, universities now need to add recognisable value to their respective degrees.

The utilisation of alumni therefore yields opportunities for forging lifelong partnerships between student and institution. In addition, MBA graduates not only have experience of the learning programme and managerial experience to offer new MBA students, but also have contacts in the wider business community, which yields opportunities of networking for both parties.

Initialising the process

The use of MBA alumni as mentors was suggested by the student

representatives during an MBA periodic review. This was supported by those coming to the completion of their part-time MBA studies, as a means to continue an association with the University. Since MBAs are a type III business Masters award (http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastrucure), experience is deemed a prerequisite of entry. However, not all enter the programme with prior academic qualifications and for those who have previously studied at university, some years could have elapsed before embarking on the MBA. Benzies and Mowat (2012) note that a mentor is a valuable resource in all sorts of ways for individuals and at different stages of their career. It was therefore seen that a mentor could help reduce initial anxiety, and provide individuals with confidence in addressing the typically work-related assessments that are commonplace on MBAs.

The notion of an MBA mentor was suggested to the new MBA intake and responses included:

'Yes, I am interested. They will be of value in terms of being able to ask them questions about the course/module; they can help give us a bit of initial confidence with someone to bounce our concerns/thoughts off.'

'I would love to have a mentor. Perhaps just someone I could turn to for advice when putting together my assignment.'

'I think it is a great idea. I think it will be handy to have someone we can talk to on an ad-hoc basis throughout the programme.'

Developing the scheme

There were five volunteer mentors derived from the last cohort of MBA graduates. Their respective experience of mentoring varied, ranging from those who assume this responsibility as a key function of everyday work-life, to those who were developing their mentoring approach as a new skill. Only three had studied the optional coaching and mentoring module as

part of the MBA programme, although this was not made a mandatory prerequisite of participation. The five alumni were offered the opportunity to gain the Chartered Management Institute (CMI) Level 5 award in Management Mentoring. With registration fees paid by the university, this was felt to provide an incentive to contributors, since it supported their continuing professional development (CPD) activities.

Matching the alumni mentors with year one mentees was undertaken by the MBA Programme Manager, based upon work environments, academic background and personality. The importance of matching should not be underestimated, with Clutterbuck and Megginson (2004) relating mentoring to the 'identification and nurturing of potential for the whole person', as opposed to coaching, which relates to 'performance improvement, usually in a specific skills area'. Ensuring a suitable match is therefore considered paramount to ensure the mentee, who owns both the learning objectives and process, is supported rather than hindered through an imbalanced relationship or over-lapping of skills between the mentor and mentee.

It is noted that there are numerous instruments or audits available (such as the Strength Deployment Inventory (http://tinyurl.com/ohdc6xw)) to determine a preferred behaviour and these have often been utilised as part of a selection process, particularly in the commercial environment. Whilst such an approach was not used here, the Strength Deployment Inventory, for example, can be used to determine respective motivational value systems and identify whether a person was motivated by valuing relationships primarily involving altruistic, assertive or analytical behaviour. This is important, since conflict can arise if behaviour is misinterpreted and relationships can be affected by incongruence of personal values with others, and so the use of a suitable instrument or audit to assist matching mentor to mentee is recommended.

Launching the scheme

Introducing alumni mentors to their respective mentees took place in early November 2012 via an informal session that enabled both parties freedom to explore roles and boundaries, along with developing an appropriate programme of meetings. Guidelines were not issued to either participant and the approach was akin to a democratic style of interaction rather than a prescriptive programme of events. Furthermore, the duration of programme meetings and longevity of events were left to the participants; it could be a relatively short interaction or it could continue throughout the academic year.

Following introductions, the alumni mentors participated in a tutor-led training programme that included a review of mentoring models, boundaries, ethical and confidentiality considerations. The European Mentoring and Coaching Council guidelines (2008) for mentoring were adopted to provide the necessary ethical code against which behaviours and expectations could be measured (http://www.emccouncil.org).

Mentee perceptions

Towards the end of the spring term, a mentee focus group took place to reflect on their observations and experiences of the scheme. In general, the mentees were approving of the scheme and many spoke of their ambition to act as mentors to future MBA entrants. They were unanimous in their support for a continuation of the scheme, even if interaction with their respective mentor was limited by choice. They all recognised the scheme as positive and supported embedding the scheme within the MBA to provide an integral and sustainable entitlement for future cohorts. Comments included:

'I found it helpful talking with someone who had been there and done it.'

'I think for the first assignment it was nice to know there was someone there to turn to for

advice, and we did find it useful speaking to him with regards to practical things like the layout of the assignment for example.'

'Encouragement from a qualified student adds to the encouragement from the lecturers.'

Conversely, mentees also stated they were unsure 'how much' to use their mentor or in what capacity. Some had tried to gain feedback on formative assessment work only to find their mentor referred them to a tutor, which was correct mentor action following the boundaries and ethics requirements covered in the tutor-led training programme. Mentees also considered there should be some consistency on the type and nature of feedback proffered by the mentors, which may have resulted from expectations following consistency of feedback from course tutors. While the importance of bringing mentors together in a mutually supportive and confidential environment to share broad experiences, discuss interventions, develop consistency in approach and commonality of experience was recognised as good practice, the widespread geographic locations and senior managerial responsibilities of the mentors precluded formalised face-to-face meetings, and the standardisation of mentor feedback was identified as challenging when considering the coordination of the scheme.

Mentees also commented that the formalisation of the process and introduction to their mentor had taken place too late in the programme and would have been better as part of their induction in September 2012. Since initial meetings took place in November 2012, with the first assignment due in early January 2013, this inevitably influenced the nature of the discussion at the outset.

Whilst the authors had envisioned the focus of early meetings to be dominated by the assignment to mirror the key anxiety reported by entrants to this professional type of qualification (given the characteristics of the target group), this could prove somewhat limiting when encountering the initial stages of a mentoring relationship, namely establishment, goal-setting and clarifying situations (Clutterbuck and Megginson, 2004).

Mentor observations

The mentors, on the other hand, via a series of telephone interviews conducted during May 2013, reported the mentees now seemed better supported as a result of the scheme than they themselves had been during their early MBA studies. One mentor offered the example of their mentee who, as an Executive Director, had copious experience but no academic qualifications, and by helping their mentee with 'some big questions and how they step into this new world of evidence-based research' was seen as fulfilling in itself.

Communication via e-mail proved to be the most frequent form of engagement between the mentor and mentee due to the difficulties of diary management or meeting on neutral ground. There was a perception from the mentees in particular that face-to-face meetings might have been more effective in helping to build the relationship. Indeed, a sustainable model emerged within one 'cluster' of mentees who commented that the success of the relationship with their mentor was attributable to a mutual commitment to diarise a face-to-face meeting shortly after their initial introduction to maintain momentum. The relationship in this case was still strong, even though on occasions, the meetings had not taken place in the coffee bar prior to a timetabled MBA session, but in a more virtual sense. In another example the mentor had established the mentoring relationship with a face-to-face general awareness-raising meeting, focusing upon the aims and expectations of the scheme, with a subsequent meeting focusing upon the requirements and personal commitments of the assessment process, before turning to more focused discussions in later meetings according to an agenda of specific questions suggested by the mentee. Other effective models involved calendared face-to-face meetings pre- and post-assessment with occasional e-mails from the mentor pledging support.

Mentors were clear on their role as 'helping them to navigate their way through their MBA to complement other support' and despite the clear message from the majority of mentees that more structure and guidance be provided (for the scheme), one mentor spoke of their preference for an informal mechanism as the relationship with their mentee 'felt more natural this way'. One mentor noted they learned a great deal from their mentees since all were from sectors beyond their own domain: 'The calibre of the students is great and you're always learning something from them.'

Points of learning

In this programme, alumni were selected on the basis of their willingness and enthusiasm to act as mentors rather than successful completion of dedicated coaching and mentoring modules or academic attainment on their MBA programme. This does raise questions about potential acceptance (by their mentees) and authority to act as a representative of the University. It may, for example, be important for a mentee to know the grades achieved by mentors during their MBA programme and therefore how qualified they feel their mentor to be in advising upon assignment preparation. One of the non-participating mentees commented: 'When I have had questions, they have generally not been the type that I could put forward in a succinct manner and answered with a simple e-mail response. Therefore, I have tended to ask these directly to staff members.'

Another described the academic process and their mentor's role: 'I think that the whole academic process is quite a personal journey and

perhaps as a result, one that you have to travel (to some extent) on your own. It takes time to find your "academic feet". You can get many practical tips about how to search for references, but when it comes to writing your assignments, you're pretty much on your own.' Using the first assignment as the focus of early mentoring interactions may have impeded the more fulsome development of the mentee-mentor relationship. As one mentee noted: 'I personally found it a difficult relationship to sustain as I believe the advice and guidance the mentors can give is limited and in my opinion the relationship has a short life span.'

An earlier start to the process with introductions taking place as part of the induction process, as suggested by one mentee, would have possibly helped. The mentees might not be concerned about their imminent assignments and both participants would feel more relaxed about developing the programme for the mentoring relationship.

Also, whilst subsequent interactions took place in the majority of cases, it was not unanimous amongst participants. With hindsight, and on the basis of feedback received from the participants, together with programme tutors, advocating regular formal meetings may have provided structure and increased efficacy of the scheme.

Future development

Due to the exploratory nature of this scheme a mentor-mentee contract was not stipulated. Normally, a mentoring contract would include the anticipated frequency of meetings, scope and confidentiality of the mentoring relationship and perhaps the duration of the relationship. The informality of the scheme, whilst easier to manage from the perspective of the University, may have introduced flaws mitigating the overall success of the venture. It would therefore be our intention to formalise arrangements with the next intake to ensure greater structure and guidance.

The process of matching mentor with mentee deserves further

consideration. While ensuring mentors are appropriately qualified and experienced is important, equally important are the personal characteristics such as emotional intelligence and self-awareness. Had mentors been identified who the authors considered unsuitable for mentoring, resulting in potential harm to the mentee, the viability of the scheme would be jeopardised and the potential for such situations should be carefully considered before utilising alumni for mentoring. There is evidence to support the mentor-mentee relationship was more successful when the mentor had previously completed the MBA Coaching and Mentoring module. In future, mentoring might be restricted to those alumni who have completed this module.

On reflection, the number of mentor-mentee relationships that prospered outweighed those that faltered, though it must be assumed those which faltered did so for a reason. As one mentee noted: 'It was certainly useful for the first module, but I think it will be less applicable as the year progresses. I generally get more benefit from talking with the rest of the class, as we are on the learning curve together and can share experiences/ideas.' Consequently, a programme team should be confident about what we do in relation to students' learning to accept that less than a 100% take-up is acceptable. Mentoring should therefore not be obligatory where individuals believe they have sufficient emotional resilience to cope with academic study without the support mentoring offers.

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