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Students Supporting Students on the PhD Journey: An Evaluation of a Mentoring Scheme for International Doctoral Students

This qualitative study presents findings from the evaluation of a pilot mentoring scheme developed in Liverpool Business School. The majority of studies on university mentoring schemes have focussed on undergraduate or taught postgraduate students, less attention has been given to doctoral students. The purpose of this scheme was to enhance peer support mechanisms for a group of international doctoral students to enable them to adapt to a new cultural, educational and social environment. Data obtained from two focus groups demonstrated that the scheme was broadly successful and provided benefits to both mentors and mentees. The evaluation raised some general issues concerning cultural integration and the way in which higher education institutions support doctoral students and international doctoral students in particular.

Keywords: mentoring, international students, doctoral students, focus groups, PhD students

I. Introduction

Changes in policies and the educational environment in general have led to shifting practices and discourses around the development of postgraduate research students (Boud & Lee, 2005). In addition, the marketisation and globalisation of higher education has resulted in greater diversity of students in higher education institutions (HEIs) across the world. Such diversity brings benefits but also creates challenges to institutions in terms of ensuring that the needs and expectations of student bodies are met (Badenhorst, Maloney, Rosales, Dyer & Ru, 2015). Together, these factors are driving an increasing interest in the way that institutions support PhD students.

The particular challenges facing international students at all levels of higher education have been well-documented. These include: adapting to a new educational environment (Kelly & Moogan, 2012); inability to develop meaningful relationships with host country students (Leask, 2009); unsympathetic staff (Lee & Rice, 2007); and

in the most extreme cases some have faced discrimination (Hanassab, 2006) and racist and religious abuse (Lee & Rice, 2007 and Brown, 2009). Those who speak English as a second or other language often have these challenges compounded by issues associated with second language use and its impact on personal and academic identity (Samimy, Kim, Ah Lee & Kasai, 2011).

In order to address these issues, many HEIs have implemented mentoring or buddy schemes, with the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) (2011) reporting that around 46% of UK Universities have schemes specifically for international students. These schemes have been shown to help international students adjust to their new environment and to integrate them into a new student community (Leask, 2009; Outhred and Chester, 2013; Samimy et al. 2011; Sawir, Marginson, Deumart, Nyland & Ramia, 2008). The aforementioned studies have focussed on undergraduate students and taught postgraduate students. Doctoral study has its own unique challenges and research students have very different needs and expectations, of which the main ones are explored below.

II. Literature Review

The last decade has seen a growing body of research exploring the PhD student experience for the reasons outlined above. A significant proportion of this research has focussed on the formal supervision process. This includes studies on how to develop supervisors (Pearson & Brew, 2002), investigating supervisory relationships (Malfroy, 2005), and pedagogical models for supervision (Berman & Smyth, 2015). Cotterall (2015) emphasised the importance of scholarly identity in the learning of doctoral students and the support required for students to become successful and confident

researchers. Her investigation of six international PhD students in an Australian University revealed the peripheral nature of their engagement with institutional activities and the lack of institutional contribution to their research identities. It also highlighted the lack of opportunities for peer support within the institution.

Peer support, often framed through the concept of communities of practice, is increasingly seen as crucial for the success of doctoral programmes (Boud & Lee, 2005; Wisker, Robinson & Shacham, 2007). The experience of a doctoral student has been widely considered to be a lonely and isolating one (Gundara, 1997; Oowler, 2010) and this can be particularly true for part-time and international students (Deem & Brehony, 2000) as well as those being supervised at a distance (Wisker et al 2007). Peer support is seen as essential to mitigate this. Samimy et al (2011) revealed the significant value of peer support and collaboration in doctoral students' personal and professional development, and in facilitating their engagement with and participation in their academic and professional communities. Similarly, Wisker et al (2007) showed the positive impact communities of practice had on doctoral programmes where students were studying in the distance mode.

All of these studies recognise the value of peer support and the importance of institutional structures to facilitate it in order to help students negotiate the complex nature of doctoral studies. It was recognised that within the Liverpool Business School, there was an informal peer support network in existence but that, considering the success of an undergraduate scheme in the same School (Mason & Eva, 2014), formalisation of this network through a mentoring scheme could lead to enhanced benefits. Thus the decision was made to pilot a scheme for all new doctoral students in LBS in the 2014/15 academic year.

III. The PhD Mentoring Scheme in Liverpool Business School

The term *mentoring* can vary according to the context, particularly in relation to doctoral education. For the purpose of this study, mentoring is defined as ‘*a deliberate pairing of a newcomer with an old-timer, with the mutually agreed goal of enabling each other to grow and develop specific competencies.*’ This definition has been based on Murray (20001, p viii) but incorporates the terms *newcomer* and *old-timer* (Lave and Wenger, 1991), and recognises that a mentoring relationship can be beneficial to both mentor and mentee (Murray, 2001).

On the basis of this definition, the mentoring scheme for PhD students in the Liverpool Business School (LBS) was designed with the aim of formalising peer support to enable doctoral students to adapt to new cultural, educational and social environments; understand and negotiate institutional structures and processes; and reflect on and share experiences of the PhD journey.

The pilot scheme involved a total of 23 students, nine mentors and fourteen mentees, from ten different countries. The total number of PhD registered in the School at that time was 38. PhD students who had been at the University for at least a year were invited to volunteer to become mentors through an e-mail sent by the Programme Leader and via a short presentation about the scheme delivered during one of the School’s monthly research seminars. Those students who expressed an interest were asked to complete an application form. All applicants were invited to attend an initial training session covering expectations, responsibilities and boundaries.

All new PhD students in that academic year were assigned a mentor based primarily on a shared supervisor and/or similar research area. A lunchtime welcome event was held early in the academic year to enable all mentors and those mentees that had arrived to meet one another. Students arriving later in the year were introduced to

their mentors by the Programme Leader or the student's academic supervisor. Mentors were expected to maintain regular contact with their mentees via their chosen method of communication for the period of one academic year. Three social events were also planned to enable all students and their families to meet one another. The first was an international evening to celebrate the diversity of cultures within the PhD student community, which took place in the first semester. In the second semester, students were invited to a meal in a local restaurant. Unfortunately the third planned event, a family picnic, had to be cancelled due to the inclement British weather.

IV. Method

In order to obtain data rich enough to understand the student experience, a qualitative method of collection was selected. Both interviews and focus groups could provide a way of listening and learning, and gaining the in-depth information required (Morgan & Krueger, 1998). However, focus groups were deemed the better choice as they 'encourage a range of responses which provide a greater understanding of the attitudes, behaviour, opinions or perceptions of participants on the research issues' (Hennink, 2007:6). A unique feature of a focus group is participants' interaction (Liamputtong, 2011) which allows participants to explore and clarify their points of view. Such an interaction, difficult to achieve in an individual interview, has been termed 'the group effect' by recent writers (Barbour, 2007).

Before setting up the focus groups, a literature search was undertaken to identify potential themes to 'prime' the discussion. The two authors each prepared a list of areas of interest and the general themes that were to help in guiding the conversations. These lists were then compared. A selection of the ones deemed relevant was made and is

shown in the appendix. The research received ethical approval from the University's Research Ethics Committee.

Two focus groups were scheduled, one for mentors, the other for mentees. Students were invited by e-mail to participate in one of the focus groups. The e-mail included information about the purpose of the study and how it would be conducted, and the voluntary nature of participation was made clear. Individual staff involved in the supervision or management of PhD students were not involved in the recruitment of volunteers to avoid any potential issues around coercion. Five mentors (55%) and seven mentees (50%) agreed to take part, representing seven of the nine 'pairings' (78%).

The focus groups and interview were moderated by the second author, who was not directly involved in the scheme, in order to diminish bias. Before the discussion began, the moderator reminded students of the purpose and conduct of the study and asked participants to respect the principle of confidentiality. Although complete confidentiality cannot be protected within a focus group setting, participants were assured that all data would be anonymised and treated with strict confidentiality by the researchers. Participants were asked to sign consent forms confirming they had understood all the information provided and agreeing to the recording of the discussions, including the use of any anonymised quotations in published research. Each focus group discussion lasted approximately one hour and the interview 40 minutes. All the discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed. To ensure anonymity of participants, mentors' names were replaced with MR and a number, mentees' with ME and a number. The researchers then independently conducted analysis of the discussions. This involved the identification of key themes supported by example

quotations. Afterwards, the researchers compared their list of themes to ensure that all significant ideas had been included.

V. Key findings and discussion

Three main themes with several subthemes emerged:

- a) Benefits for both mentees and mentors,
 - i. Academic, practical, social, emotional (mentees)
 - ii. Professional development, confidence, social (mentors)
 - iii. Rewards for mentors
 - iv. Social events
- b) Expectations regarding the role of the mentor
 - i. By the mentees
 - ii. By the mentors
- c) Keys to success
 - i. Importance of room
 - ii. Positive relationships
 - iii. Pairing of participants (language, gender, culture)

Each of the main themes is discussed in more detail below.

a. Benefits of the scheme

Having a mentor helped some mentees to feel more comfortable in the new surroundings although surprisingly, and in contrast to other studies on mentoring (Ragavan, 2014), mentees did not necessarily feel that the scheme had enhanced their sense of belonging to LBS. This could however, be due to the fact that students already felt a sense of belonging, and is discussed further in relation to the learning environment below.

Both mentors and mentees initially believed that all the benefits of the scheme were reaped by the mentees, as the mentors gave of their time, shared their experience of various academic procedures, knowledge of the university processes and resources, and locations of places (e.g. the library, computer block) within the campus. One

mentee also noted that having a mentor avoided the need for mentees to rely on academic staff for all their questions:

ME 5: 'It [having a mentor] was very useful, we cannot refer everything to our supervisor, some questions, not important ones, so we can address it to our mentor, so I believe it is useful.'

The kind of emotional support provided seemed to depend on gender. Several mentees commented that their mentors (especially when the pairing was mixed-gender) just encouraged them to work harder. Others talked to them about their own experiences which helped.

ME 4: 'He sat down and told me about his experience so hearing about his journey really helped me be more relaxed about the environment.'

Mentees found practical support particularly helpful. Mentors gave advice on schools, medical facilities, shops etc. in the social, non-academic areas. In this way, they were able to provide practical and orientation support that doctoral students, and particularly those from overseas, need in the first few months of study (Gundara, 1997).

This raises the question of whether universities should rely on students to provide such support on a voluntary basis rather than appointing paid staff. A report by UKCISA (2011) revealed that most UK HEIs provide some form of specialist advice and support for international students, usually via an international office, but only a third provided such support at faculty/department level. Many of the practical issues that international students face in the initial stages of study may not be seen as important enough to visit an advisor in another part of the campus. There appears to be a case for ensuring such practical support is provided in departments by paid employees (who could also be students).

As mentioned previously, initially, both groups of participants seemed to believe that the mentees gained the majority of benefits from the scheme. Mentors thought that

the only personal benefit of being a mentor was as a way to make new friends as conveyed by this mentor:

MR2: 'For me it is more beneficial socially rather than anything else, we got to meet new people, so it's nice.'

However, during the discussion mentors revealed a number of personal outcomes which can clearly be seen as benefits. These included, for example, gaining confidence, improving their own knowledge and understanding, and potential benefits to their future career such as skills useful for teaching and supervision, networking, and working together on projects.

MR 1: 'The reason we took this job is to make it easier for the mentee, more than for us, we have been through the experience.'

MR 5: 'If you explain something, you understand it better yourself.' 'It might be a benefit for [our] academic future.'

Additionally, both mentors and mentees felt strongly that mentors should be formally rewarded for their work.

ME 4: 'a certification for the mentor because I think they are doing an incredible job.'

MR 1 'a small qualification at the end of the year to show us appreciation.'

Providing rewards to mentors is key to the success of any mentoring scheme (Murray, 2001), and all mentors were awarded certificates at the final research seminar of the academic year. However, both groups of participants also felt that mentors should be provided with more training.

One issue that elicited consensus related to social events. Students attached great value to social events organised by LBS and would have liked more of these opportunities. The international evening was highly praised, as students could bring their families, wear their national dress and offer samples of typical dishes from their country. A study of Australian universities by Owens and Loomes (2010) highlighted how much international students appreciated social activities which enabled them to mix with staff and students. The study not only provided evidence that social activities improved students' well-being and satisfaction but also that academic performance was enhanced. Universities should not underestimate the benefits of providing the necessary resources so support such activities.

During the focus groups and interview, students were encouraged to highlight any negative or challenging aspects of participation in the scheme but none were forthcoming, which could of course be due to social desirability bias. It could also be that those students who chose not to participate in the focus groups may have had less positive experiences, but due to the voluntary nature of participation in the study, this is impossible to know.

b. Expectations Regarding the Role of the Mentor

It was evident from the discussions that there was a lack of clear understanding regarding the role of mentors by mentors and mentees alike. The expectations ranged from being a befriender to surrogate supervisor with excellent subject knowledge and computing and data analysis skills.

ME 4: '*...should be approachable, sociable.*'

ME 1: '*I think the mentor should be a rich source of information for the mentee.*'

ME 5: *'They can assist us in terms of procedures, deadlines, and maybe on research work, on the systems, on the software.'*

ME 4: *'Someone who is an expert in methodology.'*

The comments below illustrate the uncertainty the mentors dealt with.

MR 2: *'Yes there should be {training} To tell us what we are supposed to do'*

MR 1: *'Our purpose in this is not to help them in academic [matters] as this is not our role, [but] to help them in other aspects, their social life and that side'*

MR 3: *'They come asking us about how to analyse qualitative and quantitative data'*

This was linked to the comments that more training for mentors was needed. In fact, training and a handbook, which clearly delineated the boundaries and expectations, were given to mentors, but obviously this was not made sufficiently clear. As Colvin and Ashman (2010:132) point out 'students, teachers, and mentors all have different ideas about a mentor's role and how it should be enacted in various relationships' and that all parties need clarification to enable full understanding of the role.

c. Keys to success

The importance of study space

Students felt that working in the same physical space had been significant. Doctoral students in LBS have a room designated for them to work in so most mentees and mentors saw each other regularly and, although students did contact one another via other means, many of the interactions seemed to occur in the research room. One student mentioned that his mentor introduced him to people as they came into the room which helped him to get to know other staff and students. The importance of physical space in the success of the scheme is demonstrated in the following quotation:

ME 4: *'I don't think the scheme would have been as great if we didn't have the research room'*

HEIs must recognise the importance of providing a suitable space for doctoral students to work. In environments where space is at a premium and hot-desking might be considered a solution, institutions should consider the impact that such practices might have both on students' learning (Brooks, 2011) and their relationship with peers and the institution.

Matching of mentors and mentees

Most mentees felt that they would benefit from having a mentor working in the same area of research, but they understood that the whole process was more complex. One issue was the stage of study – the mentees were only just beginning their 'journey' while some of the mentors were near the end. Gender difference was not raised as an issue but it became clear in subtle ways that although in academic terms, gender did not matter, for some Muslim students, there would be implications for mixed-gender pairings.

MR 1: *'socially it's easier, for academic it doesn't matter'*

A mentee was much more constrained in contacting the mentor (means and times of contact) if the pair was of different genders.

MR 3: *'...in our culture, you [a woman] can't just pick up the phone and call them [a man]'*

There were also differences in behaviour when the pair was of the same gender. Men organised their own social activities: going out for meals; visiting places of interest and each other's families. Women's interactions seemed to be limited to the research room.

There were mixed views on the relevance of culture. The majority of the participants were more comfortable if the pair came from the same culture, whereas a

few thought it could be advantageous to learn about different cultures and exchange ideas. There were no UK students involved in the mentoring scheme as the majority of full-time doctoral students in the School have international status. None of the mentees appeared to see this as an issue. In fact, they felt that international students had a better understanding of their situation and needs, and were therefore better equipped to support them. There are implications of this which warrant further discussion.

Firstly, it questions the notion that mentoring schemes for international students can always enhance integration. There seems to be a growing body of evidence suggesting that although international students benefit from such schemes, many seem to prefer the support of someone from their own or similar culture (Brown, 2009). Secondly, there is evidence that strong friendships with people from the same culture can increase a student's sense of isolation from the host culture (Spencer-Oatey, Dauber and Williams, 2014). These two sets of evidence provide further support for the view that integration and intercultural awareness need to be embedded in the curriculum if the potential benefits of internationalisation for all students are to be exploited in the higher education sector (Leask, 2009). This is clearly not possible or appropriate at doctoral level, but some opportunities need to be made available to enable home and international students to learn from one another (Hanassab, 2006; Outhred & Chester, 2013).

Ragavan (2014) noted that students perceive the benefits of mentoring to be greater when they have selected their own mentors. What is clear from this and other studies is that there is no magic formula or one-size fits all approach to the successful matching of mentors and mentees. What is required is a pragmatic approach with a degree of flexibility. In many circumstances, it is not possible to meet the exacting

requirements of mentees and therefore a scheme which facilitates networks might mitigate the risks of unsuitable matches (Coolbaugh Walker & Taub, 2001).

VI. Outcomes

As this was a pilot study, the main limitations are the small sample size and the fact that the voluntary nature of participation meant that not all scheme participants' views are represented. Future evaluations of the scheme will therefore include additional data collection methods which will enable students to provide anonymous feedback. A longitudinal study might also allow richer data to be collected to determine any long-term impacts of the scheme. However, since peer mentoring among PhD students seems to be neglected in the literature, the study has demonstrated some of the potential benefits such schemes can provide as well as highlighting issues around the provision of support generally, particularly for international students. The evaluation also identified several areas for improvement which were implemented in the following academic year.

- The training and support documents for mentors were enhanced to ensure that expectations, roles and boundaries were clearly delineated. Mentees were also provided with information outlining the expectations for both groups.
- Opportunities for the formal enhancement of mentoring skills were explored and mentors were offered the opportunity to do a professionally recognised qualification in coaching and mentoring. This was provided by the University Staff Development department and funded by LBS.
- To provide a balance between one-to-one and group support, monthly 'research cafes' were organised. These are informal group discussions facilitated by a different mentor each month on subjects of interest related to the PhD experience and chosen by the facilitator.

- The number of social activities was increased.

VII. Conclusion

This exploratory study has provided insights into the potential benefits and challenges of a formal mentoring scheme for doctoral students. Although the scheme could be deemed successful in many aspects, one of the keys to its success lay in the fact that students had a shared working space, which was crucial in facilitating communication. The mentors in this study provided students with support in a variety of areas but HEIs may need to consider whether some of this support should be provided by other means. They should also recognise the value of providing social events and activities which encourage integration and opportunities at all levels of study for host country students and international students to learn from one another.

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Appendix – Key Topics for Exploration

Mentors

- Expectations, benefits and challenges of being a mentor
- Skills and qualities required by mentors
- Methods and types of support offered
- Perceptions of training and social events
- Suggestions for improving the scheme
- Matching process and criteria

Mentees

- Expectations and benefits of having a mentor
- Skills and qualities required by mentors
- Methods and types of support provided
- Methods of communication
- Perception of mentor role
- Matching process and criteria
- Perceptions of social events
- Suggestions for improving the scheme