

The benefits for postgraduate mentors of the mentoring process. (0102)

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Mentoring is recognised as advantageous to the person receiving the mentoring ([Crisp & Cruz, 2009](#); [Jacobi, 1991](#)); however, the benefits for the mentor are less understood. This paper explores the mentor's personal and professional development, identifying key benefits to the mentor's skill development and sense of personal wellbeing and reflection

While some studies have explored benefits mentors derive from the mentoring experience. For example, Dolan and Johnson (2009) categorised benefits for postgraduate mentors into five areas termed; 'instrumental' (employability and productivity), 'socioemotional' (confidence, satisfaction and enjoyment), 'interpersonal' (communication and mentoring), 'cognitive' (intellectual growth) and 'professional' (better understanding of the faculty). The mentors in the above study worked with their mentee on research projects, whereas, in the current study, mentors had no concrete outputs and were sacrificing their time to mentor less experienced students' receiving no formal recognition or tangible outputs.

Data were collected from two schemes pairing postgraduate researchers (PGRs) with either undergraduate final year students or new PGRs. The mentoring pairs may differ in age (not always the mentor more senior), sex, ethnicity and discipline. Mentors were given an open-ended questionnaire at the end of the mentoring relationship. As an exploratory study, thematic content analysis (Cohen et al. 2003) exploring themes emerging naturally from the data was used due to the nature of the data collected. Themes identified within each transcript were then sorted into key areas, which were in turn grouped into master themes.

Sense of wellbeing and reflection

Respondents stated they got a "... satisfaction of being there for someone" and "loved helping someone" which suggests that they felt more fulfilled by being a mentor. Within the literature mentors state through mentoring others their work became more enjoyable, they felt more satisfied and their self-worth increased (Allen et al. 1997; Heirdsfield et al. 2008; Parise & Forret 2008).

Mentoring gave mentors the opportunity to reflect, either on how far they had come, what was needed to start a PhD or their current situation. For example whilst laying out possibilities for the mentee one mentor realised she was not taking her own advice.

"Reflected myself back and where I was then and where I am... without you don't see it. ...Helping mentee with her goals helped me look at my goals"

Development

The development theme encompasses professional and personal development and the skills set mentors felt they gained or developed was broad. Within the theme are recognisable skill groups the mentors see as useful now or in the future.

Naturally, mentors used communication and listening skills along with problem solving and guidance.

“...the way he always explained the problems to me was stepwise; therefore, it was easier for me to understand.... I have learnt from this approach how I can break down problems in such a way that is easier to follow.”

Guidance was spoken of as a skill learnt rather than an act carried out during mentoring with one mentor stating she gained “... an enhanced ability to lay out options and refrain from making suggestions.”

One mentor changed the way he communicates his research in some settings because through his mentee he acquired, “... some appreciation of cultural differences in the way my research is communicated to other backgrounds.” In previous work, mentors found through mentoring they increased their own learning and knowledge by having a fresh perspective or having to explain their work to another person (Allen et al. 1997; Dooley et al. 2004; Eby & Lockwood 2005).

Interestingly, in offering motivation to her mentee one mentor felt more confident and motivated to find her next position. Discussing options with her mentee “Gave me a confidence and motivation – if she can do it why can’t I. ... Became more bold [sic] in post doc applications”. Mentors noted this mentoring scheme had given them extra responsibility, “... [Mentoring] showed me that I can handle multiple responsibilities”. Which is perhaps another aspect of confidence even though it is not explicit. Two other mentor sets (Dolan & Johnson 2009; Heirdsfield et al. 2008) showed similar results where confidence or motivation came from; selection as mentors, their mentee making them feel respected or the necessity to become better organised and motivated during the process.

The experience changed the way some viewed undergraduates. One stated this new relationship “... has also helped me in well interacting with ... the other UG [undergraduate] students in our department”. Clinard and Ariav (1998) found similar when studying student teacher mentors who transferred the techniques they had learnt and practised through mentoring to their own classrooms, and Eby et al. (2006) noted mentoring someone from a different part of the company (similar to mentoring an undergraduate perhaps) was beneficial, as was found here.

Mentors indicated this process would help if they moved into management or supervision stating “... it might help with the imminent PhD supervision process.”, anticipating it would affect the way they will build relationships in the future. Often supervisors and managers do not get a chance to practice these skills in a supported environment before it becomes part of their role as an employee. In previous research, mentors have reflected on their behaviour as managers whilst mentoring people who were not under their line management (Wanberg et al. 2006).

In learning skills for mentoring, mentors felt they became better at peer interaction. The programme gave them the opportunity to network with other PGRs and collaborative projects have resulted from

these relationships. The need for a strong network has been recognised and mentors in Heirdsfield et al. (2008) developed social ties through the process.

In conclusion, PGR mentors recognised these skills would be beneficial to them now and in the future and it is possible they sought this opportunity to add another dimension to their PhD training. The skills these PGRs gained during this experience are transferable to other situations and complementary to the skills set taught within a postgraduate research programme. Introducing these opportunities for all PGRs may be valuable for their skill development.

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