

The Burden of Responsibility: The Potential Negative Impacts of a Cross Institutional Peer Mentoring Programme.

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Introduction:

Mentoring has been cited as beneficial for the mentee in organizational settings, academia and more recently developmental research (youth work) (Chao, et al, 1992; Kram, 1985; Levinson, 1978; Scandura, 1992). However, a relatively small amount of research has been conducted on the possible benefits and costs of mentoring for the mentor. Although interest in this aspect of mentoring is relatively recent, Levinson noted the possible benefits of mentoring from the mentor's perspective in his seminal developmental research in 1978. Yet literature into the benefits for the mentors remains mostly theoretical rather than empirical (Allen, Poteet & Burroughs, 1997). Although literature from the mentor's perspective concentrates on three key areas: the career and psychosocial benefits of mentoring, the disadvantages of mentoring and willingness to mentor others, the vast majority of these studies focus on the potential benefits. Within organizational literature Eby and Lockwood (2005) reported from in-depth interviews with 24 mentors within a formal mentoring scheme that 14% spoke of feelings of inadequacy as a mentor as well as 4% reporting other problems such as relationships not being as intense as desired. Within Higher Education peer mentoring schemes a common concern, as mentioned in Craig's (1998) study of e-mentoring, was that of time demands. These students also indicated that they sometimes 'felt out of place', although this statement was not expanded on so it is difficult to assess what this refers to. Durkin and Main (2002) found that peer mentors indicated a lack of confidence on occasions and unease with the role. The negative implications reported by Hill

and Reddy (2007) contradict other research into the time demands of mentoring. The participants in their scheme felt a lack of fulfilment, they expected more contact with their mentees and said they could have easily have coped with more than one mentee. The aim of this research is to expand on previous research into the mentoring perspective with a specific focus on the potential negative impacts of peer mentoring in Higher Education from the mentor's perspective.

Method: The study adopted a qualitative design in order to gain more in depth and enriched information about the concerns of mentoring that may not be captured in questionnaire format. Six university students who were involved in the Peer Mentoring Scheme were interviewed on aspects of their mentoring that are causing concern. The data was transcribed verbatim and underwent thematic analysis following the steps of Braun and Clarke (2006)

Results: analysis indicated 5 main themes with some subthemes. The five main themes were as follows and are discussed in turn: Isolation; Anxiety; Ambiguity; Obligations and Lack of Appreciation.

Isolation was indicated by several mentors and focused on aspects of being the only mentor within a particular division, not knowing any other mentors and feeling cut off from support: "Maybe it would have been useful to see how they were getting on".

Anxiety was related to feelings of being out of one's depth which could be related to both academic and personal support "it is difficult to know what the best way is to deal with their personal problems". Additionally all mentors spoke of anxiety related to their abilities and skills. Potentially giving out incorrect information was a big concern for all the mentors "just giving them the wrong answer and then they'll get something wrong and then it's just all on your head"

Ambiguity was related to the feeling of being unprepared. However it was also related to the lack of clarity on the boundaries of the mentor-mentee relationship and the unclear expectation levels from the mentees "maybe it

would be useful if they take it more professionally or they take it more as a friend”

Obligations arose as a theme as many of the mentors discussed how mentoring could easily take over personal/ professional lives. It was difficult for mentors to see when they should draw the line as they felt a responsibility to respond quickly and accurately to mentees “ones that post all the time on facebook of the email”

Lack of appreciation relates to feeling unwanted/ unappreciated from tutors and mentees point of view. There was also the sense that they were being underutilised which developed into a sense of disappointment for the mentors “they were kind of like ‘why are you here? Why do we need you?’”

Conclusion

This study sought to assess the potential negative impacts of peer mentoring within a formal higher education scheme. The most striking finding was an unwillingness to discuss any potential negative impacts mentoring may have. This may indicate that on the whole mentoring can be viewed as a positive experience. As the reliance on mentoring is often highlighted in University Retention strategies (Phillips, Unpublished PhD) the knowledge that students see this as a positive activity is beneficial in expanding ethically upon such schemes.

Within previous literature time demands have always been specified as the most negative aspect (Eby et al, 2006) however, time demands were not discussed in the present study. What was clear from this study was the sense of isolation that some mentors felt and the general anxiety felt when mentoring others. Anxiety regarding their own knowledge, and confidence in passing that on to others, has been highlighted in other studies (Durkin & Main, 2002). Mentors within this study discussed possibilities of giving the wrong advice, information, or answers to mentees questions. It is thus essential that training of mentors considers issues of boundaries and referral systems. The training aspects of mentoring and general anxiety also ties in with other themes of ambiguity and obligations: information on the mentoring role should be made explicit within training. To further aid this continued and hierarchical support should be provided which will

help to decrease a sense of isolation as well. It can be concluded from the current study that mentoring is still viewed as mostly beneficial for the mentors and that any potential negative consequences can be addressed and monitored in continued training.

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