

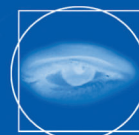


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CHALLENGING MINDS. INSPIRING SUCCESS.



Experiences of HE:FE mentoring

Lorna Allies, The Research Centre, City College Norwich

1 Introduction

It could be argued that any course of study at degree level was potentially 'vocational'. Indeed, a major factor highlighted in materials produced to encourage increased participation on to HE studies was the higher earnings enjoyed by graduates compared to non-graduates. Over the past few years, and particularly since the start of Foundation degrees, the term 'vocational' HE has come to mean HE programmes that showed a combination of some or all of the following:

- grounded and focussed on a particular vocational sector (often termed niche provision)
- involving significant work related (if not work-based) learning and assessment
- high level of employer involvement (e.g. ensuring that graduates have the skills employers want)
- strong record of graduates getting employment in the sector in a reasonable timeframe
- available on a flexible basis (e.g. part-time, use of distance learning)

Driven by the need to enhance our competitive position in the 'knowledge economy', vocational HE had become an almost global target at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The initiative to promote life long vocational learning (Field and Moseley, 1998) has moved on, and was now focussed at encouraging secondary school and FE students to continue on to vocational HE courses.

As a part of this drive to promote vocational HE, Aimhigher funded this project, which had the following interlinked components:

- HE student to FE student mentoring

- promotion of vocational HE to vocational Level 3 (e.g. National Diploma) students, to schools and sixth form colleges, and to the wider public

This article deals mainly with the HE to FE mentoring strand, covering the recruitment and training of student mentors from HE programmes to mentor students on FE programmes. It also reviews the experiences from the promotion of vocational HE by means of summer schools, roadshows, advisor sessions, staff briefings and other CPD activities.

A unique and innovative feature of the mentoring strand within this project was the use of The SOUL Record™ to pilot the measuring of 'distance travelled' by the mentees in areas such as demonstrating personal development (eg. confidence, self esteem, etc) and progress in life-skills achieved by the people. In using The SOUL Record™ model, the mentors would be able to record how mentees were developing and whether or not mentees' aspirations were raised as a result of the mentor / mentee relationships.

The overall aims of this project were to review the literature on mentoring and previous project practices, successfully recruit both mentors and mentees to the project and review the individual experiences of these mentor / mentee relationships. To hold events such as summer school, 'roadshows', 'Advisory' sessions (during the day and evenings) and staff briefings in regard to CPD opportunities for vocational HE programmes and report on these experiences also. Finally, the impact on the vocational FE student from the mentor / mentee relationship was envisaged to:

- raise aspirations
- increase motivation
- encourage achievement

- promote progression to HE

Thus, ultimately, this mentoring project had the defined aim of raising the aspirations of the FE mentees, especially in regard to HE participation.

2 Methodology

Mixed qualitative methods were used during the research and evaluation of the mentoring component of this project. These included:

- desk research/review of mentoring schemes
- literature review of related research
- recorded daily activities
- interviews with participants and other educational professionals
- mentors' focus groups

Eleven student mentors were recruited to the project and undertook mentor induction training and also received training in the use of The SOUL Record™. Post training, the mentors had an opportunity to meet prospective mentees and to use The SOUL Record™ as part of the summer school activities.

The events and activities were concerned with providing information and an insight in to HE, promotion of vocational HE to both learners, advisors and the wider public, where the student mentors were also used as student ambassadors at these events. Various data were recorded and evaluated as the project progressed.

2.1 Desk based review of mentoring / literature review

Mentoring was used as the search term, with different UK mentoring schemes and their training practices and materials examined. These literature were reviewed and the information summarised on mentoring and the general promotion of vocational HE.

2.2 Interviews

Student mentors were interviewed and provided with the opportunity to talk about their experiences as a mentor. Interviews

also sought to gain information about the mentors' own aspirations as a student and expectations of being a mentor, their views on the scheme and their thoughts on how they had been trained and supported. Those individuals who had acted as student ambassadors also reflected upon that part of their work.

2.3 Participant focus group

Focus groups were conducted to provide an opportunity for student mentors to discuss key events and issues encountered during the project, the promotional events they had worked on, in college and at outside events. They also considered the value of the HE experience to themselves and potential future HE students. A further purpose of the focus group was to collect joint feedback on any other issues, such as using The SOUL Record™, summer school and to assess their expectations for any future scheme.

2.4 Ethics

The Research Centre operates under ethical guidelines of City College Norwich and the research was conducted in line with the latest research ethics guidelines. All data were anonymised for reporting purposes and held under the Data Protection Act (1998). The participants (mentors and education professionals) had the right to withdraw from the project at any stage without prejudice. All participants were asked for their informed consent, in writing, before any data or quotes gathered through interviews were used for reporting purposes.

3. Results

3.1 Desk based research/literature review

The concept of mentoring

Davis (2000) provided a positive view of mentoring when citing that mentoring helped to reduce feelings of isolation, raised individual career aspirations, aided personal and career development, and stated that:

"It is an ideal means of supporting and retaining students on degree courses, and can form an integral part of widening participation activities."

Whether you are looking to support first generation students at university or women on traditionally male dominated courses, mentoring provides an effective means of achieving this.” (Davis, 2000).

In this case mentoring was about easing transitions and ensuring development. However, Fletcher (2000) added that it must also be responsive to the individual strengths, values and needs of both the mentor and the mentee. It was about smoothing the way, enabling, reassuring and building self-confidence.

Mentoring was considered ‘a hot topic’, with schemes proliferating throughout industry, education and health, such as highlighted by Pawson (2004):

“Mentoring schemes have been put in place in every walk of life and put forward, moreover, as a solution to all manner of individual woes and social problems. Accordingly, there are attempts to mentor women managers through the glass ceiling to boardroom positions; there are prison buddy systems in which experienced inmates try to safeguard wing novitiates; there are parenting schemes in which mothers-that-are show the ropes to mothers-to-be; there are support schemes in which dying patients offer fellowship to the terminally ill; and so on and so on.” (Pawson, 2004).

It had been cited that a lack of clarity or any consensus on the meaning / definition of mentoring was a problem, as was the constant issue regarding what was being measured and how (McIntyre *et al.*, 1993). This lack of clarity regarding the art of mentoring and its purpose remained. However, Miller (2002) provided a dichotomy by stating that there was ‘natural mentoring’, which occurred incidentally in life via friendships, teaching and counselling, and ‘planned mentoring’, which involved structured programmes with externally determined objectives and where mentors and mentees were ‘matched’. Therefore,

given such complexities, it should not be surprising that considerable confusion remained about many facets of mentoring. Also, mentoring has expanded greatly, especially within the business sector, resulting in a plethora of new materials and literature. Further, mentoring has often been viewed as a means to resolve scenarios perceived or actual that were problematic/negative in nature situations in the health service, schools, FE and HE sectors. However, despite this wide and variable usage, a definitive definition/description remained.

A few studies have tried to provide a definition. For example, Hall (2003) suggested that mentoring existed in a variety of forms and that these projects were constructed upon, at least, four dimensions. These dimensions were characterised as:

- origin of the mentoring relationship (‘natural’ or ‘planned’)
- purpose of mentoring (undirected or directed)
- structure of the mentoring relationship (one:one, one:group, etc)
- the mentoring environment (community or site based, etc)

It has been stated that truly ‘natural’ or informal mentoring, where people came together without guidance or clarity regarding the mentoring role, was a hit and miss affair (Clutterbuck, 2003). The argument being that it was difficult to influence such mentoring relationships due to a lack of ‘proper’ structure, measurement and control (Clutterbuck, 2003). Conversely, there was ‘engagement mentoring’ that had been described as mentoring with an agenda, often, to raise aspirations, which had been used widely across educational sectors (Hall, 2003). However, it was also suggested by Hall (2003) that the extent to which mentor and mentee shared the same aims of the relationship was an important factor. Hall (2003) cited a previous study by Colley (2001) that had called into question the need for a strong focus when using mentoring and stated that mentors were affected by the

mismatch between the aims of the project and the mentees' perceived own needs, which had been termed 'engagement mentoring'. This scenario was, apparently, often experienced in the mentoring of disaffected young people.

There exist International Standards for Mentoring Programmes in Employment (ISMPE), which were published in 2003 to allow companies to compare their schemes against six, key elements (ISMPE, 2003). These six elements being:

- clarity of purpose (for both the scheme and mentoring relationship)
- stakeholder training and briefing
- processes for selection and matching
- processes for measurement
- review of ethics and pastoral care
- programme administration and participant support

Review of mentoring case studies

Two example projects provided an insight on how different mentoring objectives could be. First was a project entitled 'Spreading Calm in Higher Education'. The CALM Network for Higher Education used mentoring, among other tools, to provide an "...oases of calm for reflection..." to senior managers involved in HE (Collins, 2005). Secondly, in the North West, the Centre for Training and Development (CETAD) supported a number of community mentoring programmes that provided training for mentors who work with young people and offenders. These mentoring programmes did not only raise awareness of HE but also provided a first step back into education for the mentors (CETAD, 2006).

Within the literature there was an apparent need for the training of mentors, which was often highlighted. The Balance project resource pack was uncompromising about the training of mentors, arguing that untrained mentors could do more harm than good. The project stated that training mentors helped by both integrating them into the scheme and with managing their expectations (Davis, 2000). Within the old DfES (now Dept. for children, schools and families) government

department resource pack for training mentors to subject leaders in failing schools, there was an emphasis on the need for mentors to be reflective during their training and to think about how they felt about mentoring situations. Like many of the training resources and advice sheets, the use of role play and examples were viewed as a key aspect in mentor training (DfES, 2006).

Within City College Norwich (CCN), previous mentoring projects provided a framework for this HE:FE scheme. Similarly, training materials of one such scheme a clear focus had been identified for peer group mentoring:

"[It] is to help to provide a network of interpersonal support for all students attending college. The aim of mentoring generally is to identify the needs of the partner, mentee, and to move them forward in their thinking or actions." (Richardson, 2005).

More generally within education, peer mentors were said to have advantages over adult mentors, apparently, due to peers having a better understanding of the problems and stresses mentees were experiencing. They were perceived to be less judgemental and less inclined to impose their own value systems on mentees and, probably, most important of all was that they spoke the same language.

Mentoring information and literature found highlighted the growth and types of mentoring. For example, there was much research on the utilisation of mentoring for initial teacher training, but the majority of information located how much mentoring had expanded to become an industry tool within the last decade. Hence, much of the literature/information was orientated at mentoring practice within the business/industry settings. In regard to vocational HE, several authors echoed Duke (2005) who stated that; "Apprenticeships tend to attract young people who are practical rather than academic and so the apprenticeship may be seen as a route to employment rather than to Higher Education (HE)". Duke (2005) went on to state that;

“...despite this, there is genuine progression potential for advanced apprentices, and that in the engineering sector it is a real possibility”.

In another case study, it was cited that young people with the potential to benefit from HE were not considering it as a realistic option (Cavanagh, 2005):

“Those with no parental experience of HE were unaware of the ways in which HE could be accessed, what it might offer them and of the opportunities in their own locality.” (Cavanagh, 2005).

Hence, projects have addressed these and similar issues. For example, the Graduation project (Grayson, 2006) encouraged students to continue their education and to promote vocational HE by using individual graduate case studies. Graduates were interviewed about their backgrounds, why they decided to stay in education and what benefits they had gained from doing so. In providing the case studies, graduates were offering themselves as worthwhile role models for school pupils across the region to aspire to progress on to HE. Several of these types of project, established to promote HE within the UK, used mentoring, often with HE students or graduates as role models (Aimhigher, 2006). One such example was an e-mentoring project that matched female engineering students with 12-13 year old girls from high schools (LUWES, 2006). The project provided ‘role models’ / mentors to reverse the, generally, negative perception of engineering among school girls towards a positive one. Similar style mentoring schemes have been initiated in other European countries. For example, Hoier (2005) described a scheme by the Ministry of Education in Denmark that aimed to ease the transition between lower secondary education and vocational education and training. Young people were ‘attached’ to a mentor who provided individual guidance to that mentee. Those targeted by the scheme were young people who had not yet enrolled on to a programme, had dropped out of training or faced the imminent threat of dropping out.

The mentor

Many mentoring information packs and university websites ask the question; “What is a mentor?” A typical response to this would be:

“Someone who helps others to achieve their potential through listening, advising, supporting, explaining, encouraging and guiding.” (UCL, 2006).

In business, mentors were described as wise, experienced friends or a favourite aunt / uncle type person; someone who lead by example and was a role model. The Prince’s trust business mentors provide crucial support to young entrepreneurs during their most vulnerable stages in business (Prince’s Trust, 2006), which supported the case that mentors had to have access to ‘intelligent practical knowledge’ that was derived from experience (Stephens, 1996). Such ideology asks who better to know the difficulties, possibilities and opportunities of HE than those individuals currently studying within it? Crofts (1995) cited a main concern regarding the mentors was whether they would get on with their mentee. However, the main focus was on the working relationship, once that had been established the mentoring partnership was successful in more than 80% of cases (Croft, 1995). Hence, the utilisation of The SOUL Record™ in this project to initiate and build a working relationship between mentor and mentee.

Whilst there was an obvious emphasis for mentoring schemes to succeed, Brooks and Sikes (1997) warned that mentoring projects could also fail. This was especially so when support and encouragement for the mentor had been lacking in projects (Brooks and Sikes, 1997). It was also stated that despite the best intentions, there were cases, either subject or personality driven, where mentors had reached a point beyond which they felt they could not or should not continue (Brooks and Sikes, 1997).

Qualities that were perceived to be essential requirements in a potential mentor were

reported in much of the literature, allowing the production of a generic list of qualities required in mentors. In no particular order, these included:

1. the ability to listen
2. respect for mentee's values
3. be trustworthy
4. an ability to share
5. an ability to question
6. to be non-judgemental
7. to be positive
8. an ability to engage in planning
9. an ability to review and evaluate
10. an ability to challenge.

Miller (1998) also reported on the characteristics for the effective training of mentors, stating that (in no particular order):

1. informal training style
2. interactive group work
3. insights into what to expect
4. specific targets
5. clarity on dos and don'ts

Mentor training appeared not to have evolved greatly from that given in the 1980/90s. Training literature (DfES, 2006; Gover, 2005; Aimhigher, 2005) included the use of body language, the study of personality types and learning styles, however, fundamentally, listening and asking the right questions were still regarded as the most important skills to be a good mentor. While the manner in which questions were asked had always been known to be more important than the type of question. Hence, Parsloe (1992) advised:

"The most structured open question in the world will not produce the right response if it is delivered in an aggressive, condescending or over-challenging manner." (Parsloe, 1992).

3.2 Mentor recruitment and training

This mentoring project conducted at CCN recruited students already enrolled on HE courses to become mentors to individual FE students within the college. The HE mentors were also deemed to provide a role model to the FE student mentees, whilst offering them support and encouraging them to aspire to

HE. However, the majority of mentors were not from vocational HE courses.

The SOUL Record™ training

In a previous mentoring project evaluation, it was reported that unless positive outcomes could be demonstrated relatively quickly, policy makers and funders would rapidly move on (Shiner *et. al.*, 2004). Hence, all mentors were trained in the use of The SOUL Record™ (for further information on The SOUL Record™ visit www.soulrecord.org). The use of The SOUL Record™ within this mentoring project addressed issues highlighted in literature regarding the rapid collection of data for evaluation. All mentors attended training and provided feedback. Mentors were confident in their abilities in using The SOUL Record™ and 'agreed strongly' that it was important to measure soft outcomes with mentees.

The SOUL Record™ also recorded further benefits, these being:

1. it was apparent that The SOUL Record™ questionnaires would allow mentors to easily build a relationship with mentees
2. it provided immediate and clear feedback that was able to provide data that tracked progress
3. it permitted mentors to review / reflect on what they had accomplished in their role, as well as providing direction and encouragement to the mentees.

Summer schools

HE student mentors had had the opportunity to trial The SOUL Record™ at summer schools. Seven summer school events were held covering Sport, Hair and Beauty, Dance, Business, Teen Baker, Teen Chef and Art. The objectives of the summer schools were to raise aspiration, self-esteem, confidence and awareness of vocational pathways through FE and on to HE. The attendees were from Years 9 and 10 (aged 13 to 14) from schools with low levels of post-16 progression on to education. It had been observed that such students had the ability but not necessarily the aspiration or family

tradition, to progress to HE. Working alongside lecturers, eight, HE student mentors provided help and support to these school children throughout the week (from Monday 17th July to Friday 21st July), totalling 158 hours. Six mentors recorded thirty-two mentees completing the 'Getting to Know You' and 'Raising Aspirations' sections of The SOUL Record™ in the process. Data collected from The SOUL Record™ questionnaires allowed measures of soft outcomes for these mentees (Fig. 1), and provided an opportunity for trialling the system.

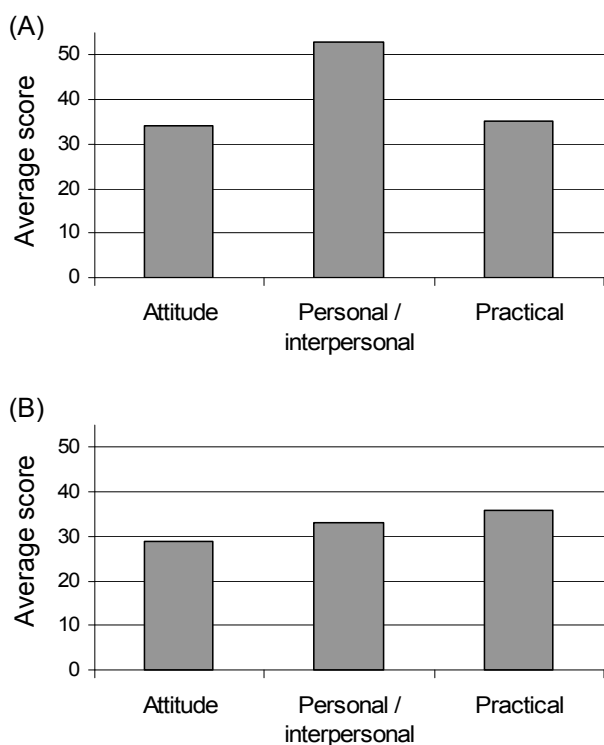


Figure 1. An selected set of baseline / average score measures as examples of the 'Getting to know you' (A) and 'Raising aspirations' (B) results outputs from The SOUL Record™ recorded for the school students attending the Hair and Beauty summer school (Source: Allies, 2006, unpublished).

3.3 Mentor interviews

Mentor A

Mentor A was a student taking a combined

arts and science degree who had applied to become a student mentor to help others. They explained:

“One thing I found while doing the Access [course] is that it would have been handy to have somebody to tell me how to go about doing things. Everyone you ask says something different. It would have been really handy to have somebody to say you need to do this, this, this and this”.

Reflecting on the training process, Mentor A stated that clarity was provided regarding the expectations of mentors post induction training. They also stated that “To actually know what is expected of us and what isn’t and what the boundaries are as such...” identifies good practice. However, The SOUL Record™ was termed simply as “...just the record keeping side of things.”

The summer school experience recorded a more positive response, stating:

“Brilliant. Really enjoyed it. The kids seemed to get a lot out of it. They changed from first day to the last day. It was amazing. They seemed to get so much out of it”.

Part of the mentor’s role was to take care of those who were going out as part of the activities. Also, much assistance was required during a final exhibition / presentation. Possibly due to their personal experience, Mentor A had a good understanding of the needs and requirements of each mentee:

“I suppose the main thing might be what they want to do in the future and how to go about things - especially like the UCAS applications and knowing when deadlines are. One thing I found doing Access was that there was not a lot of advice [available]”.

Also, mentor A had acted as a mentor ambassador at outside events and stated that:

“As soon as it [the presentation] has finished you find that, especially the

children rather than the parents, will come over and ask specific things about the college - what is available and what student life is like”.

Mentor B

Mentor B was a student on a combined English and Cultural studies degree who was hoping to go into secondary school teaching as a career. They had applied to become a student mentor because:

“... I want to go into teaching and I thought it would be valuable experience for me to have. Also, if I can help people I would like to do that”.

Mentor B did not think that enough information had been provided from the outset and suggested that it would have been beneficial to go into the job role in greater detail. As had been reported by fellow mentors, the induction training experience was not a positive one. The best part reported by Mentor B was meeting the other mentors and the co-ordinator.

However, Mentor B did report The SOUL Record™ training to have been very useful:

“It went into what we had to do in more detail than the induction. You could maybe have done both sessions [induction and SOUL training] in one go”.

Despite having only attended one day of the summer school, Mentor B's experience had been a negative one, stating:

“I wasn't sure about my whole entire role. I felt a bit like a spare part. The tutor was really welcoming and friendly and I helped the kids a bit, but they had another assistant as well so there was the tutor and two others kind of helping the kids. Not a lot of kids to help so ...”.

However, Mentor B was successful in regards to engaging the school students with The SOUL Record™:

“I got a group at lunchtime. I think

there were four together. I had quite a few volunteers. No problems. The girls were very friendly and chatted about it. They were great actually. It gave me an opportunity to chat to them, one question could lead to another. I had only known them for the morning so I don't know how honest they were being on the questionnaires”.

Mentor B's expectations were that the mentors would be a good point of contact for the school students:

“I would build a relationship with them, an open relationship where they can contact you if they want to. I'd like to think I could encourage them to go higher but obviously it's not for everyone. It's quite a nice thought really to encourage people to go on”.

Mentor C

Mentor C was, again, a combined arts degree (English with Cultural studies) student. They considered they had a better idea of what the aims of the project were compared to their fellow mentors:

“It's to be a mentor to FE students and to be there as an ear more than anything and a sounding board. To let them know that there are options beyond what they are doing at the moment that they can progress on to”.

Mentor C was extremely positive regarding the personal advantages of conducting HE level programmes, stating that:

“[I have] a lot more confidence in my own abilities - confidence in myself in that I now know that I can do HE so to speak. It has also given me drive and focus for what I want at the end of it. I now know what I want to do”.

Although they were more pragmatic when discussing the generally perceived advantages gained by all from undertaking an HE level programme:

“I don't think HE is for everybody. I don't think that everybody should do it, but I think for the right student with the

right frame of mind it is definitely an advantage to pursue it”.

Both personal and professional benefits were perceived to have been gained by mentor C from having the experience of being a mentor. There had been a clear focus post the induction training; “It gave more focus to the role and what your position would be within the student mentoring framework.” The SOUL Record™ training was also very positively reported:

“SOUL was very interesting. You can see afterwards what you were doing and how the information was collated and the other sheets that were available and in what context”.

Similarly, the summer school was favourably reported, which was aptly demonstrated in the following statement:

“It was fab, really interesting, really good. The first day I was not sure where I sat, where I was. I was running around for the lecturer and I was also one of the students at summer school. I felt a bit awkward to begin with being in the middle. Once I settled into the role of - sometimes I was going to be with them and sometimes I was going to be with the teacher – it was quite good. It was nice to see both sides”.

Mentor C used The SOUL Record™ questionnaires with a group of school students, and recommended that it was better to do them after the students and mentor had got to know each other a little:

“On Wednesday I asked for volunteers and had a queue. That was quite nice. I think having been with them for the two whole days I felt that I could, because I had some knowledge about them and we had already spoken and chatted, it was a better opening. I don't think I would have felt entirely comfortable going straight in with the questionnaire. Because I had already learned a bit about them I could give more of an input and say ‘why did you

say that, I thought you were more confident...’. Some of the follow-ons, the aspirations – they were quite interesting. I was very lucky in the group I had. They were very highly motivated. They were doing it because it was the career they wanted to possibly go into”.

The expectations from the scheme by both Mentor C and the mentees were synonymous with the aims of the project:

“[For the mentees] it is hard to know at that age what you do want to do. Some are very focussed, but the majority are just trying to kill a bit of time. ... I think, from their point of view, that they know what they are doing and are comfortable with going into the second year; for myself, reassurance that what I have done is right by them. I feel supported and encouraged throughout the whole process. So far so good. Let's hope it continues and we have our real mentees”.

Mentor D

Mentor D was another student taking a combined arts with science degree (psychology with English), who had arrived at college straight from a small sixth form. They saw the advantages of HE from the point of view of employers who would be assured that applicants from HE had determination and the ability to concentrate and work. The experience of Mentor D regarding HE was good, giving more personal independence than was possible at the sixth form level.

As with other mentors, the main reason for deciding to become a mentor was a desire to follow teaching as a career:

“I want to go into teaching and get experience; because I want to teach sixth form, A Levels up, so it would be good experience to see what people are like when they are studying”.

Mentor D found the induction training helpful and had gained listening skills and knowledge of the rules and boundaries for

mentoring. The SOUL Record™ was viewed very positively again:

"SOUL was really interesting. I think it is good to have a way of recording things like this. ... made more sense when were using them [SOUL questionnaires] at the summer school".

Mentor D's experience of the summer school was, again, similar to other mentors:

"All right, it was interesting spending time with the girls in my group. It helped them having someone in between them and the teacher stage. No one seemed to know we were going to be there. Once they knew what we were doing, I thought, they were pretty chuffed about it".

The SOUL questionnaires produced an interesting response from Mentor D's group:

"It was quite hard to get them to sit down and do it. They had just had lunch and the sugar was beginning to kick in. The girls were quizzing as it seemed a strange thing to them. They asked 'what does this word mean?' They weren't reluctant, just intrigued. They were quite young, they were 14 or 15 and had not given thought yet to their aspirations".

Reflecting on the needs of the mentees, Mentor D stated:

"Judging from the girls [at the Summer School] they found the college pretty daunting - a huge place. That's all they kept saying the first couple of days. I think understanding the library etc, and as they progress, things like Internet access, revising and things. I remember what I was like when I came up to do a degree here".

Mentor E

Mentor E was a mature student who had returned to education after a twenty year gap to study a combined science degree (psychology and sociology). They considered that the HE / FE mentoring scheme was well

publicised and had wanted to become a mentor to help people in FE see what they could progress on to:

"City College has given me a lot. It has given me confidence and helped me with all aspects and I would like to pass that on".

Conducting an HE programme had also given Mentor E a "...bigger outlook...":

"I have four kids and this will be for the future for when they have all gone. I want to do postgraduate work and get my BPS [British Psychology Society - chartered psychologist] accreditation".

In relation to the mentor induction training, their response was mixed:

"There is a lot in it. Good advice and that. It had everything you would need. ...[but]... I wasn't keen about giving out the mobile phone numbers to the mentees... a few of us thought ummm".

Again, The SOUL Record™ training received positive feedback:

"It was good. You can really see how with the questionnaire ... how they are doing".

Again, Mentor E enjoyed the summer school and asked for feedback from the summer school children:

"I loved it. It was really good. The group I was with, they seemed to enjoy it and on the Friday we found that all the other school groups had enjoyed it. There was a couple from my group definitely coming to the college. You had enthusiasm from them as well. I went around and asked how they had got on the day before and were they getting anything out of it. Some were really nervous on the Monday and by Wednesday they had blossomed. It was good to see".

When asked what the needs of the FE student mentees might be, the response

showed a good understanding of the aims of the scheme:

"They might have personal issues and you can help them find the right direction. A lot of them need confidence that they have got the ability to go further, which is something I didn't have to start with".

and

"I hope that during the year I will have helped one or two people to realise that they have potential. It will have given them confidence. If I have done a good job then they will become mentors themselves in the future. I think this project is a good idea and should have been done years ago".

Mentor F

Mentor F was also taking a combined degree of arts with science, studying English and sociology. This mentor aspired to have a career in charity fund raising. They had taken The SOUL Record™ training on board very thoroughly and was also aware of the purpose of the project:

"We will monitor the progress of students, progress that is not measurable. [It's about] being there for them. This is not about grades is it? Other stuff does go unacknowledged. To make the student more aware of what can be achieved in Higher Education - different routes. Not everyone knows what you need".

However, they lacked knowledge regarding vocational HE, assuming that NVQs could not be conducted at HE level:

"Some people are better off doing [an] NVQ. Some people go straight into work and work their way up. What do employers want, experience or qualifications?"

Mentoring appealed due to the experiences of this mentor:

"When I was at school I could have done with a student mentor. It is quite daunting at a college this size. It will

be nice to be there for someone".

The induction training had worked better for this mentor, in so far that it looked at mentoring rather than the aim of the scheme:

"I learned to sit back and see how people think. The different ways people learn was helpful. What is expected of mentors. It clarified a lot more, although I would have liked some example scenarios to work with".

The SOUL Record™ training received positive feedback again:

"It was really interesting and I quite like the ideas behind it - the measure of.... and we got to do it ourselves".

Talking about the work at the summer school, Mentor F had both positive and negative comments:

"I really enjoyed it. I had a boisterous, loud group - the boys show off - but they settled down in the end. Interesting characters and it was quite nice sitting back and watching them. They were so happy they weren't at school. The teachers were called by their first name and they thought that was fantastic; they just couldn't grasp it. Plus I had art and got into things with them. I really, really enjoyed it".

and

"No one came around to see how you [as a mentor] were getting on. I explained to the tutors why I was there and they thought it was a good idea. The tutors were good".

Difficulties were experienced working through The SOUL Record™ questionnaires, but were considered worthwhile:

"I did six I think. Two of them I sat down with, but it was so hard to approach them as it was all hands on. It was hard to get them on their own and they were never sitting quietly. Other times the tutors wanted them to do questionnaires, so a few of them

filled them out together. They asked questions as they did it. It was awkward. Only two were one-to-one. They filled out the questionnaires and they asked me questions. I explained it to them. One of the boys said 'I sound like such a big head because I am so confident'. I said that that was a good thing. We may have to get them not to worry about sounding too confident. Some were a bit shy and I let them get on with it".

Mentor F viewed the mentoring work as helping the mentees in the following way:

"[They] will need to know where facilities are and where to go for certain things. Just support really until they find their feet. Depends how they are getting on with their course. They might want to get involved with something ...[for example] the union, but do not know how. [At the end of the year] I hope I will have helped someone have a more pleasant studying time and to feel better about themselves, and to try to do well rather than just doing it for the sake of it and help them to just enjoy being here as well".

Mentor G

Mentor G was also taking a combined degree of arts and science, studying psychology and sociology. They were hoping to follow a career in counselling. They heard about the mentoring scheme from friends and enjoyed the recruitment process. Asked about the purpose of the scheme, Mentor G stated that; "It was to support and give guidance to [people] ...It was not just to A Level students, it uncludes other students." Supporting previous mentor statements, Mentor G also did not think HE level programmes were for everyone:

"... I do think that for those that want to pursue it there is a lot of opportunities and a lot of advantages. It is not essential but I think it really does help. I get quite a lot from it. I feel that I have grown, that's a bit of a cliché, but as a person I have grown

because with A levels you are kind of spoon fed everything and you are told exactly what to do and in HE you have to focus and achieve what you want. Once you are given that kind of responsibility you either step up and take it or don't and, if you do take it on, you realise what your potential is and what you can do".

Mentor G also discussed their own aspirations and reasoning for becoming a mentor:

"I thought mentoring would be good experience for me. I know it's not counselling, but you know, it is listening and it is helping and getting used to one on one conversations. I wish that I could have had someone to mentor me when I started. I wanted to give any help I could give and it will also give me great experience as well, and something for my CV ... everyone's a winner".

Asked about the training, Mentor G stated:

"I didn't gain an awful lot from [induction training] because it was quite rushed and because we were being ambassadors as well, but it did give an overview. What was expected of us. For practical reasons it was a bit rushed and it was hard to concentrate".

In regard to the training on The SOUL Record™, they were very pleased, stating that:

"Once we done that it all kind of fitted together and I knew exactly what we were doing. The questionnaires, the target sheets and how it brings it up into the graphs at the end and that. It was a really good idea because it shows to the mentees their progression and where they are going".

and

"I thought [the mentors' handbook] was really comprehensive. Everything

was in it. It was really well written actually. It's easy to use to go back to find things".

In concert with fellow mentors, the summer school experience was, again, a positive experience, stating that the children had got a lot out of it as well. Completing The SOUL Record™ questionnaires with the children had not been difficult, in fact, the forms were "...simple and understandable for the children...", going on to state that:

"None of them seemed to mind doing it at all. They are brightly coloured and look quite fun and most of them seemed quite interested in it."

Mentor G had given the needs of the mentees a lot of thought:

"Quite varied, obviously the academic like how do I write these essays and I have got so many how do I manage my time and social issues. I remember when I was that age ... boyfriend problems, best friend problems, fall outs. They sound a bit trivial [but] they are so important to them and should be taken seriously. There may be important problems too like pregnancy and drugs. They can't really turn to parents and friends are not much help and might be encouraging it. You can't turn to your tutor so they might talk to us".

Mentor G viewed the scheme overall very positively:

"It's such a good idea, especially as you have got the split, you know the FE and the HE. Why not make use of it and let them be there to support and inspire [FE students] to go further. I think it is such a good idea, especially because of the age range. City College has such a large mature student base so why not make use of us. I am so excited to get on with it and really looking forward to it."

Also, Mentor G had worked as a student ambassador with parents, but found this a

different challenge:

"I found some of them to be a bit dismissive of us. 'Is there a lecturer or someone in charge I can speak to?' Fair enough, we are only students. Parents want to speak to someone in charge. We didn't have little badges saying we were part of the college - that might have helped".

3.2 Participant focus groups

Focus groups held with mentors raised several 'key' topics, which have been addressed individually. These key topics were:

- A/ Road shows and events
- B/ Purpose of the mentoring scheme
- C/ The value of HE
- D/ Mentor induction training
- E/ The SOUL Record™ training
- F/ Summer school
- G/ Expectations for following year

A/ Road shows and events

During the first focus group it was reported that it did not appear to matter who per se was present at events, as long as HE students were represented. It was agreed that because existing HE students had chosen an educational pathway for themselves meant they were in the best position to be good role models for potential, future HE students.

In general, all focus group participants had perceived all events/activities to be successful, although difficulties were acknowledged in evaluating events, such as a public stand in a shopping centre. It was cited that the HE profile at City College Norwich had been raised. However, it was also agreed that greater amounts of FE information were being given out rather than HE. Though a longer term view was raised that all interest should be viewed as positive for the college.

A second focus group also worked as ambassadors and discussed their work at events, including roadshows, an event for

several schools and a public stand in a large shopping mall. One mentor stated:

"I hadn't been around 14 and 15 year olds for some time. I got chatting to quite a few of them and a lot of them hadn't even considered going to college afterwards or anything. After hearing our stories about what we thought of it, it seemed to kind of sway them and, you know, it was then literally something they would look at in the future".

There was a general perception that such events had resulted in better responses from parents than from the children themselves.

B/ Purpose of the HE/FE mentoring scheme

There was a difference reported between the two focus groups on this. The first group put forward several thoughts/ideas that included:

- just being 'somebody' for 'anybody' to talk to
- somebody to email or phone to ask 'what do I do to carry on after this?'

However, the second group were not clear about the purpose/aim of this scheme. They thought it was to be a support for FE students and to be someone they could come to for information, advice and guidance (IAG) and even encouragement.

C/ The value of HE

Again, there was a difference reported between the two groups. The first group agreed that job prospects were improved after completing an HE programme and that the social side of studying was as important as the actual degree. One member of this focus group stated that "...HE study changed you...", and they discussed about how they had seen changes, for the better, in each other. However, the second group focussed much more on personal progression and the need for qualifications. The group agreed that better pay and opportunities would be available after completing an HE programme (although one participant qualified this by saying 'allegedly').

D/ Mentor induction training

The first group discussed what they had learned during induction. The main areas being; a/ the job description and expectations, b/ the boundaries of mentoring, and c/ the paperwork side of the scheme, record keeping and how the SOUL excel spreadsheet worked. While the second group liked the handbook produced; one participant said, "When I read that latter, I picked up things I had forgotten". They felt they had benefited from doing the exercises in the book, especially the one about different learning types. Although the exercises were available in the handbook, they felt it was a lot better to do them as part of a group in training.

E/ The SOUL Record™ and its training

The first group decided that certain sections of the forms may not be needed. They discussed about the use of smiley faces on questionnaires and were not sure that the prospective mentees liked them or realised the significance of them. However, the second group had all enjoyed the training. They felt they understood The SOUL Record™, especially its history, stating:

"We understood where it had all come from and it wasn't something that had just been devised for us".

They thought it was very helpful to do the questionnaires and worksheets and, thus, had put these into practice during the training.

F/ Summer school

It was suggested that due to the summer school attendees being younger school children, and not the HE mentors' target group of FE students, had lead to difficulties in using questionnaires. Apparently this was because the summer school students needed to have things explained in much greater detail. One mentor highlighted that the group they were with was not academically minded, suggesting that this made completion of questionnaires even more difficult.

The second focus group discussed the summer school more generally. In relation to

the school children attending the summer school, it was stated:

“Ours weren’t sent because they were naughty kids, they had earned their place”.

and

“The girls just wanted to have a chat all the time about what I was doing, how I had got there and all the different things I had done”.

and

“Ours wanted it to be longer. They wanted it to carry on”.

The group agreed that the school children had all enjoyed their experience at the summer school.

Whilst questionnaires had been completed with children, there had been some difficulties experienced:

“It was hard to grab them on their own. They were busy slapping paint and stuff on”.

There was agreement that the progressive order of The SOUL Record™ questionnaires was liked, such as starting with the ‘Getting to know you’ and progressing on to ‘Raising aspirations’:

“You know you got like a bit of a story with them and then the ‘raising aspirations’ [sheet] kind of topped it up and you got to see it from a different perspective”.

It was also agreed by all that it would have been easier if they had had a chance to get to know the children a little first.

G/ Expectations for next year

Members attending the first focus group suggested that mentors should meet up once a month to discuss any problems encountered and any positive experiences or novel actions that had ‘worked’. This resonated with the project co-ordinator who raised the importance of keeping in touch with mentors. Mentors were also concerned

about how little people appeared to know of the HE mentoring scheme within the college and that HE student mentors were now available to FE mentees. Another concern expressed was the lack of awareness by the summer school tutors about mentors also attending to support the students / tutors. The mentors also suggested that induction or freshers week and other similar events would be good times / places to publicise the mentor service and what it was there for.

This issue was partially echoed by the second focus group. Whilst some mentors were formally introduced to tutors at the summer school some were not, with one mentor stating:

“I wasn’t introduced at the summer school. I don’t think they [tutors] used us as they could have done. We could have been used a lot better”.

Although it had been an excellent opportunity for the student mentors to chat to the pupils at the summer school, they were keen that next year they should be factored into the planning at an earlier stage so that they could be more effective.

4. Conclusion

Whilst a clear dichotomy existed in regard to natural versus planned mentoring, it was also clear that mentoring was developed upon the idea of providing a role model who could enable, reassure and help to build confidence in their mentee/s. However, at the time of the project there was little consensus regarding the concept of mentoring: what it was and what was being measured for example. Also, with the introduction of mentoring into new sectors had resulted in ever greater variability in reported definitions, while each novel introduction brought their version of standards and measurement techniques also. What was established and acknowledged was that the mentors themselves required a practical knowledge of the local environment, derived from their own experiences within the areas in which they studied and / or worked.

A common factor among the many innovative mentoring schemes established to raise the profile of HE, was the use of students as the mentor / role model. Commonly, these students had either previously or were currently involved in the HE process at that institution.

From interviews held with mentors used during this project, an obvious character trait was their enthusiasm and encouragement for the scheme. This was summed up by one mentor when stating:

“City College has such a large mature student base so why not make use of us. I am so excited to get on with it and really looking forward to it.”

During interviews with mentors they highlighted the interactions they had with FE students as a major reward; how they helped them to become more aware of what they could achieve and how they could progress through the education system. All the mentors interviewed reported gaining much from being involved in HE themselves. For example, they talked about having more independence, greater social advantages, more confidence and, even, a new awareness and realisation of their potential. However, there was caution too, as HE was reported not to be ‘the answer’ for everyone. There was a general perception that not everyone had ‘the right frame of mind’ and some would gain more from work experience.

In response to answering the reasons for wanting to become a mentor, the majority of students recalled their own experiences and how much having a mentor scheme, such as this one, would have helped them at the same stage. Also mentors spoke of the invaluable experience, both personally and professionally, they had gained from having taken part in the scheme and the sense of satisfaction in helping others. For example, some had wanted to give something back to the College in return for the new confidence it had provided them. This general view was summed up by one mentor who stated:

“I wanted to give any help I could give

and it will also give me great experience as well and something for my CV.”

The mentors who worked with the summer school were perceived to be very successful in their role and this had increased the level of interest in the scheme and enhanced its credibility with lecturers / tutors. The mentors, themselves, enthused about the summer school, calling it ‘fab’, ‘brilliant’ and recalled that all the school children had also got much from the experience. While, initially, two mentors had been uncertain about their roles at the summer school, after the first day this had been lifted with all mentors then being fully involved and enjoyed it. They felt that they provided someone between the child and the teacher, someone that the children found very helpful and easier to relate to.

Mentors who had completed The SOUL Record™ questionnaires with children, reported that it had given them an opportunity to get to know the individual much better. Also they reported that the children were keen to take part and were, generally, intrigued by the activity. Isolating an individual from their peer had been a problem for some mentors, such as one example where the mentor, looking after boys, felt it was hard to isolate any individual. However, in general, mentors thought the questionnaire format was very helpful; it was “...fun...” to work through questionnaires made easier by the fact they were “...brightly coloured...”.

Mentors who had worked as ambassadors saw themselves as very useful when talking to school children, but less so when talking to parents. Parents appeared to want authority figures and often asked ‘who is in charge?’ There was a perception that official badges might have enhanced the mentors’ role as ambassadors of the college.

The focus groups gave the mentors an opportunity to discuss their experiences in regard to working as ambassadors during promotional events, the purpose of the HE / FE mentoring scheme, their training, the summer school and their ideas and expectations for the scheme in the next

academic year. During discussions they realised that, at roadshow events, prospective students were interested in the college in general rather than a specific subject area. What was important was that they had a real HE student to talk to. The consensus of the group was that all events had been successful and raised the profile of both FE and HE at the college, but that the results of such public events were difficult to evaluate. However, their joint views on the purpose of the mentoring scheme were not as clear as they had been during individual interviews, and mentors talked in vague terms about helping with study, etc. The induction training received a better response during focus groups; one group viewed exercises that were done during the training as enjoyable and helpful. The SOUL training was also enjoyed because of the practical element of doing the questionnaires and worksheets together. Everyone had enjoyed the summer school immensely, and they were aware that the target group was FE students rather than school children. The mentors nevertheless had a very animated discussion about the summer school and how much the children had appeared to get from it.

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