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Online mentoring – a role in Widening Participation?

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Introduction

Students from lower socio-economic groups and from ethnic minority backgrounds, with less tradition of entry into higher education, may not consider HE as being appropriate for them. Once in HE they may under-perform, and either discontinue or fail to do well in the employment market. We know that the experiences of ethnic minority MMU graduates reflect the national picture of career destinations, in that they are more likely to be unemployed following graduation compared to their white counterparts:

	Percentage unemployed MMU		
	1999	2000	2001
White	4.0	5.2	4.7
Ethnic minority	8.0	8.3	5.6

To try to improve the university experience for our students, online mentoring has been piloted within the MMU Foundation Year. MMU Careers Service was also recently funded by the DfES to develop a pilot project, offering online mentoring support to black and Asian students and graduates. Linking ethnic minority graduates and students with suitable alumni and other professionals is intended to help them develop the skills, confidence and contacts that are required to succeed in the highly competitive graduate labour market. The Web address of the pilot is:

<http://www.mentor.mmu.ac.uk>

Traditional mentoring is both resource-intensive and often difficult to arrange due to time constraints of participants. Online mentoring would potentially accommodate many more graduates and students than traditional face-to-face mentoring and may overcome time and distance barriers that exist in trying to pull together busy graduates, students and mentors in diverse locations.

This report describes the development, implementation and evaluation of this pilot, and promotes the possibility of a wider role of online mentoring in supporting students in HE and in offering pre-entry support to groups unlikely to consider HE as an option.

Aims and objectives of the pilot

The pilot ran from 15 July to 31 December 2001 with evaluation thereafter.

The aims of the project were: to develop high-quality, action-centred and long-term relationships between mentors and mentees, mediated online; to provide a structure and purpose to the mentoring process through the implementation of a lifelong learning model; to measure the success of online mentoring as a technique and to make recommendations for further development.

The objectives of the project were: to recruit a minimum of 30 (ideally 100) mentors matched with 100 home black & Asian graduates and students; to develop a Web-based system to support links between mentors and mentees; to develop an online portfolio allowing recording of self-analysis, goals, action plan and reflective log; to deliver supporting documentation and online support; to produce a newsletter and manage an e-mail discussion list; to produce an evaluation tool for the pilot.

Key features of the pilot

How was online mentoring intended to work?

As well as e-mail communication, participants interacted online: each mentor and mentee logged on to the online mentoring environment and was presented with a set of areas into which the mentee could enter a personal profile, goals and an action plan, and also could reflect on their learning during the process of mentoring. This information was visible only to each mentee, their mentor and to project staff. The mentor could read and comment on what had been entered in order to encourage the development of each section. Discussion areas and chat rooms were also available. This online approach did not preclude face-to-face meetings, and indeed a number of mentoring pairs met physically and/or spoke on the telephone.

Regular e-mail contact by project staff ensured that participants were constantly reminded of the support available.

How did people take part?

Potential mentors were contacted through mail shots to MMU black & Asian graduates 1995 – 1998 (1350 individuals), the Careers Services database of contacts (3000 employers) and to 46 professional bodies. Local community groups such as the Broad African Representative Council, the Zimbabwe Society, the Inkululeko Group, the

Somali Association, the Gambia Association, the Nigerian Association, the Ghana Society and the Muslim Professional Society were also contacted.

The process began with online registration of mentors, who provided personal and biographical details. When project staff approved each registration, this information was automatically posted anonymously to a Web site and a confirmatory e-mail was triggered.

Mentees were recruited through mail shots to recent MMU alumni and an e-mail to all black and Asian MMU final year students. Publicity was also distributed to all higher education Careers Services inviting registration. Mentees completed their registration forms and chose three potential mentors for their 'hot lists'. To make these choices mentees matched their needs with the background, skills and experience of each mentor.

Approval of a mentee's choice of mentor by project staff triggered e-mails to each, informing them of the match and giving contact details. The e-mails also contained links to the mentoring system and each person's private login codes. This registration and matching system ensured that mentees had the information they required to choose their mentors, and that they had some input into the matching process.

Outcomes and evaluation

By the end of December 2001, **92** mentors were registered; 52% were MMU alumni and 39% were black or Asian. **97** mentees were registered, 72% of whom were MMU alumni. 42 mentees were unemployed, 27 were in training or on a course and 28 were in employment. Of those employed, 79% were in jobs that they felt were inconsistent with their qualifications and experience.

Evaluation responses were received from 15 out of 97 mentees (15.5%) and 20 out of 92 mentors (21.7%). Of the mentees, 9 (60% of respondents) could be said to have engaged in significant activity, while the same could be said for 8 (40% of respondents) mentors. The time scale of mentee recruitment may have been responsible for some partners not having undertaken significant mentoring, with some partnerships not being underway for long by the time evaluation was performed in January. Other mentees and mentors reported that their partners were less than committed (42% of mentors and 23% of mentees disagreed that their partners were committed to the relationship).

Due to the low numbers of respondents, interpretation needs to be treated with caution. It is planned to follow up the progress of participants at a later stage, when they have had more time to develop their relationships

Evaluation of the pilot covered the following areas:

Programme information and support

The purpose of the project was shown to be well-understood, and the guidelines and support from the pilot leader well-regarded.

Registration, matching and notification

The online administrative system was well-received. Only 8% of mentees disagreed that there was a good choice of mentors. 19.2% disagreed that their partner was a good match.

“Registration is easy, and being able to choose the type of mentor is useful in getting the best type of advice for the career I want to progress in”

Partners, their relationship and the mentoring process

The majority of mentors and mentees who engaged significantly in mentoring were communicating once per week or more frequently. Comments received illustrate the value that was perceived in the relationship:

“The service has been great because I am able to communicate with someone that I wouldn't normally meet let alone know about their day to day work or them know about the problems I may have in getting into a career I want”

“The relationship has been very effective and we have developed a good understanding”.

“Excellent. I am receiving all the help and guidance that I was looking for”.

It's an excellent way to get very useful guidance for study and job hunting”.

“I have found the process to be very thought provoking, useful and supportive”.

All of the participants who engaged significantly in the mentoring process agreed that they had formed a positive working relationship. Most of the interaction was by e-mail, although some meetings and telephone conversations had taken place. Many participants expressed their dislike of logging on to the online mentoring area, and their preference for communication by e-mail.

The best thing(s) about this project.....

“...were the choices of mentor and how the one allocated to me has been very supportive. I have seen my confidence improve at work and am making active choices to progress my career”.

"...is that it is an excellent source of practical help and advice".

"...is being able to talk to someone about my job searching experiences and troubles, who has experienced the world of job searching and is outside my immediate circle of friends and family".

"...is the feeling that you are able to guide and advise a student and that your help is eagerly sought".

"...is getting to discuss my career choices and how I might get there".

80% of participants who engaged significantly agreed that they would recommend this programme to a friend or colleague. 64% thought that the quality of the programme was 'very good' and 36% felt it 'adequate'. No-one felt that it was 'not very good' or 'poor'.

Areas that require improvement or that were less popular:

Participants were unanimous in their dislike of logging on to the online mentoring environment to complete and to view the portfolio areas and to use the discussion areas and chat rooms. They much preferred to e-mail each other, finding this method of communication more relaxed and informal.

What next?

Clearly online mentoring has achieved a level of success in the eyes of participants in this pilot. Evaluation has helped to identify development opportunities that would improve the system, of prime importance being an acceptance that e-mail is the preferred form of communication. Strategies of interaction should be devised that would build on this, which would enhance the quality and structure of interactions but also enable monitoring by system administrators.

In the light of the variable level of commitment to mentoring by participants, thought would need to be given to ensuring that once registered, participants maintained their relationship with their partners. This might involve more active screening of registrations, pre-registration induction/briefing and closer monitoring and prompting of activity.

In the future it may be possible to extend mentoring across MMU, and to provide mentoring for pupils in deprived areas around MMU, by students who are trained and who receive credit for this work. In this way such pupils would have role models who would motivate them to study, raise their awareness of and increase their likelihood of progression to HE.

If you would like further information about this pilot project, or would like to discuss how you might be involved in its further development, please feel free to contact me.

REFERENCES

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GMB, 1996: **Divided by Degrees**, GMB, London.

For a more detailed report, please visit the website:
<http://www.mentor.mmu.ac.uk/dissemination>

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