



A Learning & Teaching Research Collaboration

Community building through a Foundation Mentoring Scheme

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Section 1. Executive Summary

The project set out to discover if and to what extent our mentoring scheme has been successful in enhancing students' sense of belonging and connectedness with the University, which are established elements of student success. Wishing to get detailed views of participants, we held focus groups. Whereas our results derived from a small sample of participants and are, thus, indicative of the mentoring experience, they have been useful in demonstrating that our mentoring scheme has been successful in increasing those participants' sense of belonging to the university. It has provided additional opportunities for and the conditions to form relationships that perhaps would not have otherwise developed, enlarging, thus, the community that participants can engage with. Results also show that the scheme had had a transformative impact on participants' personal and professional development. Reflecting on their sense of self, they reported that their experience as mentors reconfirmed their commitment to helping others and inspired them to think about their future careers in a new light. Moreover, the scheme has also provided mentors with valuable learning opportunities. Participants reflected on the skills and attributes they gained from the scheme, including active listening and an empathic approach. Thus, they applied them during the mentoring sessions and became more knowledgeable about how to use them in their studies and professional lives. These encouraging results can form a basis for further explorations of student identity and belonging.

Section 2. Background and Aims

The project aimed to discover if and to what extent our mentoring scheme has successfully enhanced students' sense of belonging and community building. Although these represent different things to different students (e.g., for some, they may involve reaffirming their decision to study in HE, whereas for others, they may mean building social relations with fellow students), connectedness with the university is a known element in student academic success (Yomtov et al., 2015, p. 26). Mentoring schemes are an established mechanism of creating such emotions (Sanchez et al., 2006), fostering a sense of community between students and a university to support changes due to transition to higher education (HE).

Specifically, we aimed to explore the relationship between belonging and mentoring and what this may mean to students at foundation level (mentees) and at other study levels (mentors) and investigate how belonging may extend beyond retention and progression. Secondly, we wished to bring forward the richness of participants' experiences which cannot be captured through evaluation, thus broadening our understanding of the mentoring experience and its impact on participants. Thirdly, we wished to develop the student co-creators and project participants' knowledge of the mentoring scheme with the view of them taking a more active role in its future expansion. Our findings may be helpful to anyone interested in retention and student support mechanisms, as well as course leaders and directors of teaching and learning and students wishing to be involved in mentoring.

Section 3. Methods

Our project aims to discover if and to what extent the mentoring scheme has successfully enhanced students' sense of belonging and community building. To understand this, the research employed a qualitative design, initially planned for focus groups to explore our mentors' and mentees' sense of belonging and community. However, due to the challenges of participant recruitment, the research employed semi-structured one-to-one interviews instead.

Recruitment

Participants (all mentors and mentees on the Foundation Mentoring Scheme) were recruited directly through email invitations sent by the Foundation Mentoring Scheme Coordinator (also on the research team). Invitations were repeatedly sent on three occasions between January and March 2022 for mentors and mentees to express their interests. Participants were self-selected, and those who expressed an interest were invited to a convenient time and date to attend the interview at Cavendish Campus, University of Westminster.

Interview Questions

Using a topic guide (Appendix 1), participants were encouraged to share their Mentoring Scheme experiences freely. Interview questions were designed to reflect the research aim and objective but also the opportunity to understand better how individuals perceive their sense of belonging at the University of Westminster. Interview questions were developed through a conversation within the research team to address the key areas that should be covered concerning the study's aim.

Data collection

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by the interviewer over two steps. Firstly, audio files were uploaded into the Otter.ai software and transcribed online – note that the audio files were subsequently deleted from the online platform and stored in the university's cloud with the computer files all password-protected. Secondly, the researcher manually reviewed each transcript to check for accuracy against the original audio and make corrections accordingly. Each transcript was given a unique identification number and kept in a separate digital file from the original raw transcript with the participant's identifiable number. Participants' personal information and identifying details were removed from transcripts to ensure anonymity.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, which is used in qualitative research to identify themes developed (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Inductive thematic analysis was used to help provide a better understanding of what, why and how behind participants' perspectives. The research team analysed the data collected manually, and themes were discussed for agreement.

Ethics

Ethics and related approvals were obtained from the University of Westminster, Centre for Education, Teaching and Innovation Ethics Committee (reference: CETI-LTRC-2122-01). The project also complied with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Data collected were kept confidential according to the university policy considering the GDPR guidelines, such as password-protected computer data files.

For participant confidentiality, transcripts were checked manually, and any personally identifiable information was removed. A participant number was assigned to each participant to identify participants. All electronic copies of consent forms and other electronic data were stored on the University of Westminster H-drive and OneDrive in a password-protected file.

Section 4. Results

Following data analysis, findings will be presented in three sections. The first section examines what it means to belong within the institution and the Mentoring Scheme. The second section focuses on the experience of being part of the Mentoring Scheme and what it feels to be part of Westminster.

This is then followed by the impacts of how the Mentoring Scheme has on the wider Westminster experience.

Due to the challenges of participant recruitment, only two students (mentors) attended the in-person semi-structured interviews held at Cavendish Campus.

Defining belonging

Participants shared that belonging could be defined as a *"sense of sharing experiences with other people"* (Participant 2) whether with other peers and or members of staff. At Westminster, students felt that they belong by being in a community where others around them have a *"sense of understanding that we've been there, we know what you're going through, and we're here to help you"* (Participant 2). This could demonstrate how being in a community or environment could be beneficial in having a supportive network, for example living in university accommodations, participating in university-organised social activities in addition to building a network, and confidence in addition to non-academic support. An example of this was having peer-support group where participants shared how they would arrange regular meet-ups to discuss their academic work and get to know each other as they progress through their degree programme.

...living with other Westminster students was interesting, especially from people from all over the world...meeting people that I wouldn't have met otherwise people who wouldn't even do my course, you know, and living with them and learning about myself and my resilience. (Participant 1)

We arrange and to go for coffees and discuss about what do we think about the module. And what's our experience and then get to know each other a little bit better, and what we want to do after the university. And so these are some other examples that yes, we discuss between students. (Participant 2)

On the other hand, having a positive sense of belonging at university was not always the case. Participants shared how sometimes being a student could make them feel isolated from the university environment. A common situation shared was the start of every new academic year when participants transition from one year to another, especially the first week or the first term, where they would feel like an imposter. Perhaps this could suggest the new academic year experience with the uncertainty of what to expect of the students. However, participants nevertheless shared how they could get over that feeling of "fraud" after settling into lectures and resuming that routine of attending lectures, seminars and completing deadlines. Another example of a negative experience was during deadline periods, with the participant feeling lost as they were stressed with the assignment they had. Looking to find support, the student shared how they sought advice from their academic tutor with the expectation that they would be able to help solve the problem. However, their expectation was unmet as the staff member was overwhelmed with their workload and could not spend much time helping them. This, in return, made the participant felt like they were unsupported as they "didn't get the answer that they wanted to help with [my] assignments" (Participant 2). Here, it could demonstrate how the expectations of students could sometimes be different to staff members and how that could impact students' sense of belonging at university.

It's usually every first term, and at the first week. Is that freshers' phase, being very excited...You feel as if how did I pass last year? Is that like imposter syndrome that you get, like, how do I manage this. I get that every year. But I get over it soon. Soon as lecture start, I'm sitting in lecture. I'm like, it's fine, it just goes out the window. it's just getting into the routine, you know, getting up going to lectures, getting through your readings...(Participant 1)

Being part of Mentoring Scheme felt part of Westminster

Participants shared that being part of the Mentoring Scheme has made them feel they belong at Westminster. For example, as a mentor, one participant shared how their relationship with their mentee developed over time, and they were able to develop a trust aspect between them where the mentor was able to help their mentees with settling into university. For instance, the discussion on expectations between mentor and mentee and how best for the mentor to support the mentee made them feel part of the university as a student. But also provides opportunities for the mentee to ask questions about the student experience and for the mentor to become an empathic and active listener. This could suggest how the relationship between mentors and mentees through the scheme can help enhance that institutional sense of belonging.

...I emailed her and said that, if you have any questions, please bring them. So that's the one thing I asked her to do before she came because I don't want to be there and me talking for the whole hour. So it was like giving them the opportunity to ask questions. (Participant 1)

Feeling emotionally connected with the university was a theme developed during the interviews for all participants. Students shared how their role as mentors made them feel satisfied and rewarded in how it impacted their mentees and "validated why I [mentors] chose to be a mentor" (Participant 1). It was clear that the mentors felt they had a duty of care when matched with a mentee for the scheme, taking the time to connect with their mentee so that they felt part of Westminster, whether through sharing their university experience or being there to support them settle in. But further, mentors felt that being part of the scheme made them feel as if the university had entrusted them to support new incoming students and help to make a good first impression of Westminster. Therefore, this could suggest the scheme has enhanced the sense of belonging for both mentors and mentees.

...it feels nice that that university trust me to support another students throughout their journey. And, and it's also nice to share my experience with a student who's now on their foundation year because I've been on that same course...For them, I'm the person that they're going to, to conduct and seek for advice just feels really pretty rewarding. (Participant 2)

Building connections with peers through the Mentoring Scheme benefited the participants. It was described how being part of the scheme has allowed them to get to know other mentors, sharing experiences whether through the organised events through the scheme or developing their own network with others at Westminster. For example, having a WhatsApp group enabled students to stay connected with each other, having more conversations and support whether through the mentoring scheme and or through their academic courses: "*We have a Whatsapp group...We've been out for a coffee. And we've discussed about past assignments and our modules...*" (Participant 2). Therefore, this could suggest how the mentoring scheme has enabled connections with peers to develop their sense of belonging in the scheme and at Westminster.

Impact of the mentoring scheme on Westminster experience

Participants were asked how their mentoring scheme impacted their Westminster experience. Interviews showed there were two aspects of this. Firstly, a positive impact was a common theme shared by all the participants. Here, mentors found that being part of the scheme cemented their perception of why becoming a mentor in the first place and how it provided them with the opportunity to share their university, inspiring them to possible future careers.

And I think it's, it made it clear to me that I really liked helping others obviously...but being a mentor it kinda came at the right time and made it really clear to me that yes, I am in the right

path. And also gave me the opportunity to think about other jobs that I could do in the future and possibly work as a mentor. (Participant 2)

The mentoring scheme impacted participants' experiences and experiences but also demonstrated the skills gained. For example, active listening emphasises how important it is in a mentoring relationship and how it can apply to their degree programme and future career. Empathy was also another skill that participants developed, demonstrating the encouragement and supporting role a mentor plays within the mentoring relationship. But further, how the skills developed from the mentoring scheme can help develop the participants' soft skills as they graduate from the courses.

... we have been taught that as a graduate in the future that we need to attain this skill. And by having a mentee, and actually to have this skill in real life made it a little bit easier to me. And also, apart from active listening, empathy is something that also increased...I was doing the foundation year a few years ago...it was like, almost I was almost I will be relieving is when my mentee was sharing her anxieties and any issues that she might have had with modules and things like that. (Participant 2)

Section 5. Discussion

Having focus groups was an appropriate method to evaluate the scheme as it helped us obtain rich responses from participants. It has been a positive experience, allowing us to explore participant views in-depth, but it has also been challenging. Although we were aware of the difficulties of engaging students in focus groups, we were unprepared for the low uptake. Our call for focus group participants was answered only by two students (mentors) out of a total of 48 mentors and mentees, so our results only indicate the overall participant views. Having mentee contributions would have enriched these findings and helped us understand the mentees' experience and impact of the scheme. However, limited as they are, these findings provide valuable insights and a useful starting point, raising issues that merit careful consideration and may be further explored in future projects.

The results confirm that participants felt connected with the university through a network of contacts. This corresponds with the well-established view that being part of a stable group and engaging in social activities creates and increases feelings of solidarity and belonging to the university. Our data demonstrate this sense of belonging is mediated by the experience of feeling isolated at the beginning of the academic year. This insight can be useful to anyone organising Arrivals Week activities. It is encouraging to see how the mentoring scheme has increased participants' sense of belonging to the university. It has provided additional opportunities for interaction with other groups of students (mentees) and the conditions to form relationships that perhaps would not have otherwise developed, enlarging, thus, the community that participants can engage. These results align with mentor and mentee feedback obtained during our mentoring events and those from studies on the effectiveness of mentoring concerning the student experience of both mentors and mentees (Hall & Jaugietis, 2011).

Overall, participants demonstrated a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities and took pride in contributing to the scheme and their mentees' experience. They also identified the transformative impact of the scheme on their personal and professional development. Reflecting on their sense of self, they reported that their experience as mentors reconfirmed their commitment to helping others and inspired them to think about their future careers more broadly and in a new light, considering jobs they had not thought of before. Moreover, participants reflected on the skills and attributes they gained from the scheme, including active listening and an empathic approach. They saw the relevance and application of these during the mentoring sessions. They also felt more knowledgeable about using them in their studies and professional lives, so the scheme has also provided mentors with valuable learning opportunities. These results confirm that for these

participants, the scheme has successfully met its aims, increasing their sense of belonging and enlarging their community networks; they form a strong basis to continue and extend the scheme.

Section 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, our mentoring scheme has demonstrated the transformative impact on participants' (i.e., students) personal and professional development. The success of our mentoring scheme has therefore emphasised the importance of supporting new Foundation students in the university. But further, allowing existing students to act as mentors, developing their active listening and empathic approach to become more knowledgeable with transferrable skills that could apply to their studies and professional lives. For us as staff members working on the mentoring scheme, this project has provided us with rich insight into students' university experience, which perhaps cannot be captured through traditional evaluation. Therefore, this project provided the opportunity to reemphasise students' positions and their active role in HE – whether for student engagement and retention or to enhance Westminster's learning and teaching approaches.

Following the completion of our project, our recommendations are as follows:

- Continue with our Foundation Mentoring Scheme and expand the opportunity to all disciplinary areas with a Foundation Year Programme
- Continue working with colleagues (including both academics and professional services), ensuring that our scheme can be disseminated far and wide to raise awareness of the mentoring programme to enable students to develop their professional skills and sense of belonging
- Continue to broaden the conversation within the institution, recognising the foundation students' knowledge when entering Level 4 while supporting their transition and progression at university.
- Continue supporting our Level 4 to 6 students as mentors to develop their professional skills to become more knowledgeable with transferrable skills that could be applied to their studies and careers.

Section 7. Dissemination

This report could be useful to policymakers, directors of teaching and learning and academics interested in measures to support students and improve the student experience. Also, mentoring scheme coordinators, foundation program leaders and tutors who can encourage students to participate in the mentoring scheme, and new and existing students who could be interested in joining the scheme.

Section 8. Reflection

This project has provided the team with good insights into the success of the Foundation Mentoring Scheme and, moving forward, how best to support students as they transition into Foundation Year and later progress into Level 4 and beyond. On reflection, despite the challenging aspect of participant recruitment (e.g., 2 participants out of the whole scheme), our semi-structured interviews provided the opportunity to collect valuable insights from students and their skills developed. The data collected allowed us to understand students' lived experiences and how the mentoring scheme has facilitated their sense of belonging while studying at Westminster.

The problems we faced during the project were recruiting students from the mentoring scheme to participate in the (initial) focus groups. Due to the lack of interest, especially in incentives for the participants, only 2 students (mentors) expressed their interest out of the 40 mentors and mentees. Therefore, the data collected was skewed toward mentors' experiences and meant little data was

collected from mentees. A possible solution for this problem could be conducting surveys instead of focus groups/ interviews, which might influence students' participation. However, this disadvantage could be the limited insights into the students' experiences.

As this was a 'Students as Co-Creators' project, another challenge was having enough student partners within the team for the project's duration. Therefore, the workload would sometimes fall on the staff members rather than a shared responsibility between staff and students. To overcome this challenge, perhaps to recruit students earlier in the project, ensuring two or more students are involved, rather than a single student, which might underrepresent what 'Student as Co-Creators' is about.

Nevertheless, this project has provided us with the opportunity to understand how our mentoring scheme has impacted our students' experiences and their sense of belonging and connectedness with the University.

References

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Appendix 1 – Interview Questions

Questions For Mentors

General

1. How do you define 'belonging'?
 - a. What does belonging mean to you specifically at Westminster?
2. Can you tell us about a time when you felt a real sense that you belonged at the University of Westminster?
 - b. What was that like for you? Can you describe it?
3. Was there a time when you didn't feel like you belonged at Westminster?

Mentoring Scheme

4. Has the mentoring scheme made you feel more part of Westminster? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
5. Has the mentoring scheme helped you to connect with other students and staff?
 - c. How has it improved your experience at Westminster since you started being a mentor?
6. How will you use your Mentoring Scheme experience as a mentor as you continue with your academic study?
7. How do you think you have helped your mentees to feel part of Westminster?

Questions For Mentees

General

8. How do you define 'belonging'?
 - d. What does belonging mean to you specifically at Westminster?
9. Can you tell us about a time when you felt a real sense that you belonged at the University of Westminster?
 - e. What was that like for you? Can you describe it?
10. Was there a time when you didn't feel like you belonged at Westminster?

Mentoring Scheme

11. Has the mentoring scheme made you feel more part of Westminster? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
12. Has the mentoring scheme helped you to connect with other students and staff?
 - f. How has it improved your experience at Westminster since you started being a mentor?
 - g. Has it helped you settle into the university as a new student?
13. How will you use your Mentoring Scheme experience as a mentor as you continue with your academic study?