

EVIDENCE ON EDUCATION TO CAREER TRANSITIONS IN THE FINANCIAL AND ACCOUNTANCY SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Session: The aim of this pilot project was three-fold: 1) create a learning intervention with the aim of developing priority employability skills as determined within the financial services and accountancy sector for first year undergraduate students; 2) explore the participants' experience of the program content; 3) identify recommendations for future schemes. The United Kingdom (UK) Financial and Legal Skills Partnership (FLSP) developed a platform to provide mentoring and skills development across financial services and accountancy. Known as "Get In Get On" (GIGO), the FLSP'S virtual work experience comprises two discrete though interdependent features: 1) skills and knowledge development; 2) e-career mentoring. Between February 2014 and April 2014, twenty eight mentees and mentors (from Middlesex University and supportive organizations/individuals) participated in the scheme. The pilot evaluation suggests that there is reciprocal learning for students and professional mentors within the context of the accounting and finance profession. Students have benefited from a heightened awareness of the career opportunities available in the sector and how their studies may assist them in developing their key employability attributes. Feedback suggests that the scheme has greatest benefit for students entering Higher Education, with a view to preparing them for future employment.

JEL: I2, Y8

KEYWORDS: Education, Career Transitions, E-Mentoring

INTRODUCTION

Graduates emerging from universities in search of employment are confronted by a number of challenges. One of these challenges is that they carry a degree stating their subject discipline rather than explicit evidence of their capability or transferable skills. Furthermore, they often lack the skills to position themselves appropriately in the employment market. Supporting education and career transition through mentoring and employability initiatives are both widely researched concepts and can address these issues. What is lacking is an examination of the contribution that mentoring can make to employability. Furthermore, advances in technology have redefined mentoring as a learning and development activity and heralded e-mentoring, using online solutions to open up possibilities of mentoring relationships that cross boundaries of time, geography and culture (Zey, 2011).

The Financial and Legal Skills Partnership (FLSP) is the 'skills champion' for the financial and legal sectors in the United Kingdom (UK). FLSP has a single goal: to proactively support the development of a skilled workforce in the UK's finance, accountancy and legal sectors. FLSP derives much of its funding from the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES). UKCES is a publicly funded, industry-led organization that offers guidance on skills and employment issues in the UK. UKCES is an executive non-departmental public body of the UK Government's Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS). In

recent years FLSP has partnered with Brightside, a charity which aims to give every young person the advice or inspiration they need to get to where they want to be in life, to develop the online learning resources and online mentoring framework known as “Get In Get On” (GIGO). The FLSP’S virtual work experience comprises two discrete though interdependent features:

Skill and knowledge development: Students undertake immersive learning courses on skills, such as customer service in financial services, commercial awareness and understanding risk, over a one month period. They undertake these courses entirely online and content has been developed and shaped by industry to centre upon the knowledge, skills, competencies and behaviors needed to prepare students for the sector.

E-career mentoring: At the core of the program is e-career mentoring from a volunteer from the sector. This e-career mentoring gives students an opportunity to speak to a professional from the industry (or if preferred alumni contacts of postgraduate researchers), ask questions, and get advice on either the learning modules or on careers generally. As a result, the relationship between the student and mentor can be developed and could potentially lead to further work placements or even to the student applying for a summer internship or graduate entry level scheme.

The platform to date has centred upon financial services and accountancy but plans are afoot to broaden occupational sectors to include legal professional services. To date the GIGO platform has been centred upon supporting sixth formers at Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) Level 3 to develop priority skills and competencies. However, feedback suggests that the learning content is just as relevant for undergraduate students. The project stakeholders identified a number of wide ranging drivers. However, the aims of this project were primarily to support the development of employability skills in a diverse mentee group, to enhance employment opportunities and raise awareness of the attributes required to succeed in the financial services and accountancy sector; utilise the support of at least ten experienced mentors from the sector, and offer the opportunity to provide e-mentoring exclusively via email exchanges; evaluate the extent to which mentee participants are able to make better career decisions; establish a model of supervision for mentors, suitable in a virtual setting, and enable FLSP to review the product portfolio with a view to establishing ‘suitability’ and ‘fit for purpose’ in the higher education sector.

The goal of this study is to provide researchers and practitioners with the building blocks to evaluate a project of this type and identify the extent to which the aims and objectives of the key stakeholders of the project have been achieved. These stakeholders include Middlesex University Teaching and Development Grant sponsors, the Project Team at FLSP, FLSP’s key stakeholders (in particular The Brightside Trust), MU Business School and University colleagues in the MU Business School Project Team. This paper begins with a discussion of the key concepts of employability, mentoring and e-mentoring embedded in the literature. We will provide an overview of the Get In Get On programme, outlining the aims and objectives of this project and key stakeholders. We will then discuss the methodology used in the study, provide the study’s results, and will conclude with a discussion of the relevance and importance of the findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section will consider three increasingly relevant elements of career development and transitions – employability, mentoring and e-mentoring. In doing so, we make a distinction between career development as a process, set of actions or outcome and employability as a combination of skillset, mind set and internal capability.

Employability

In this section we will initially review perspectives on the term ‘employability’ before reviewing attempts to create frameworks to guide those seeking to develop employability attributes. A set of core attributes is routinely outlined by employers as indicators of their needs and as ciphers of ‘graduateness’. These typically relate to ‘world of work’ behavioural practices such as reliability, good timekeeping, confidence and complex problem solving and, no less importantly, to ‘soft skills’ such as communication, team working ability, the capacity to operate independently and to demonstrate contextual sensitivity, including intercultural awareness. Recognition of the value of these attributes and of their pertinence to HE learning within and outside the curriculum is regarded by many as fundamental to helping Higher Education institutes achieve the highest possible outcomes for its student population. Underpinning this is the belief that these attributes should be developed from the outset of and throughout a student’s academic journey.

This singular perspective is challenged by Holmes (2013, p540) who refers to this as the ‘possessive approach, one in which graduate skills and attributes are treated as if they are capable of being possessed and used.’ Whilst dominant in many regions, especially the UK, this is regarded as deeply flawed. Drawing upon the critical educational literature, a second approach termed ‘positional’ suggests that Higher Education is structured so as to *reinforce existing* social positioning and status. A third perspective draws attention to the interaction between the graduates seeking employment that they deem suitable and those who are gatekeepers to such employment (termed the ‘processual’ approach or perspective.) Both Pool and Sewell (2007) and Yorke (2006) review attempts to define the increasingly widely-used term ‘employability’, the latter seeking to distinguish what it *is* and what it is *not*. Both draw on Hillage and Pollard’s (1998) perspective around the enhanced capability to transition and shift self-sufficiently within the employment market, realising potential through sustainable employment.

Yorke (2006) stresses that what we are discussing here is employability rather than employment, the former being an on-going process of building capacity and the latter an outcome. One does not necessarily lead to the other. He also makes the serious point that employability is more likely to be effectively created *in* employment and is likely to be limited whilst a student’s primary environment is a Higher Education institution. This point brings into question the concern about employment being of a ‘graduate level’. For some graduates the move to a level of employment deemed appropriate to their age and degree discipline appears seamless however an increasing proportion of university graduates globally starts careers in work that does not require a university degree to get or to do the jobs, i.e., in *underemployment*. Okay-Somerville and Scholarios (2013) point out that although early underemployment is often regarded as transitional, our understanding of the dynamics of boundary-crossing from early underemployment into adequate or meaningful work is scarce. Yorke’s (2006) point above suggests that a state of *in-employment*, regardless of level, may be a richer environment for building employability than a state of *not-in* i.e. *unemployment*.

Pool and Sewell (2007) review four frameworks that evolved from the late 1970’s through into the first decade of the 21st century. Hillage and Pollard (1998) identify assets to be built and then deployed, presentation skills to be developed and reiterate that personal circumstances and external forces must be considered. Bennet *et al.* (1999) suggest that course provision should combine disciplinary knowledge and skills plus workplace awareness and experience. Knight and Yorke (2004) coined the acronym USEM which goes beyond disciplinary and workplace understanding and skills (the U and the S) to include efficacy beliefs (E) and metacognition (M). Pre-dating all of these is the DOTS model of Law and Watts (1977) in which planned experiences are intended to facilitate decision making (D), increase awareness of opportunities (O), develop skills to support both the transition (T) process and development of greater self-awareness (S). Whilst there is common ground in each, and each provides its own unique checklist, it is only in Knight and Yorke’s (2004) USEM model and Law and Watts’ (1977) DOTS models that we see the idea that the individual’s identity, the ability to make sense of their thinking and how they are or might be approaching the employment market is seen.

Pool and Sewell's (2007) review lays the foundation for their own list of essential components of employability and the clever configuration of these into both an acronym (CareerEDGE) and the visual image of a key. The strength of this model lies however in the explicit recognition that building employability requires the positioning of stepping stones in the form of increased self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-awareness. The model also makes explicit the requirement for reflection and evaluation, and the increasing importance and value of emotional intelligence (EI), both what it is and why it is a vital part of this process. The authors suggest that the means to achieving these stepping stones is Personal Development Planning, although making only fleeting reference to Moon's (2004) paper *Reflection and Employability*. It is our argument that skilful mentoring has a significant role to play in the reflection process leading to increased EI and in turn employability. It is the purpose of this research to shed light on whether e-mentoring support employability and career transitions in first year undergraduate students. The next section will review briefly perspectives on the concepts of mentoring and e-mentoring.

Mentoring and E-Mentoring

The process of mentoring, the role of a mentor and mentoring programs in organizations are not new and most discussions make reference to the role played by the mythical character, Mentor, from whom the process takes its name. What is less commonly relayed is the description as 'wisdom personified; a paradoxical union of both path and goal' (Bierema and Hill, 2005, p 557). These authors conclude that the definitions and the functions of mentoring vary widely which probably contributes to the widely differing degrees of formality and structure associated with mentoring schemes. At one extreme there are the overly bureaucratic schemes dominated by administrative procedures; at the other extreme is the 'light touch' approach in which aims, objectives or strategic relevance are poorly developed or articulated and outcomes rarely pursued for the purpose of evaluation. What is not in doubt is that mentoring is a developmental relationship in which experience and knowledge are passed from one party, the mentor, to another party, the mentee. The usual assumption is that the former is older than the younger but as Zey (2011, p 142) points out, Jack Welch and GE recognised the need for younger employees to 'mentor upwards' so to speak so that older workers could keep abreast of rapidly evolving technologies.

The rapid evolution of ICT has been seized, in some cases without question, as a way of extending the process of mentoring to overcome spatial and temporal divides. Much debate has ensued, and continues, seeking to determine whether the benefits of face-to-face, traditional (or t-mentoring) are maintained, enhanced or diminished by the increasing range of modes of electronic communication now available for what is variously referred to as e-mentoring (Bierema and Merriam, 2002; Shpigelman *et al*, 2009; Hamilton and Scandura, 2003), virtual mentoring (Bierema and Hill, 2005; Zey, 2011) or instant mentoring (An and Lipscomb, 2010). Scandura and Hamilton (2003) summarise the strengths of e-mentoring, for example in overcoming the challenge global organizational structures by allowing mentors to be in different places, different time zones, to communicate either synchronously or asynchronously and even to remove some of the visual status cues which sometimes inhibit communication between the more senior or experienced mentor and the less experienced mentee. Bierema and Hill (2005) echo some of these advantages but also highlight some of the challenges such as cost and reliability of technology, the challenge of articulation via online skills, the *loss* of visual cues such as body language and facial expressions which are regarded by most commentators as being as meaningful to a relationship as the spoken words, and the challenge of creating appropriate matches when participants have no first-hand experience of each other prior to engaging. In their discussion of the value of e-mentoring for women in particular Headlam-Wells et al (2005) highlight a number of barriers that prevent all prospective mentees regardless of gender or career stage from finding a mentor. These include a lack of available mentors in an industry or profession, increasing demands on potential mentors, lack of similarity in attitude or demography, or organizational or geographical boundaries. E-mentoring offers a way of overcoming these barriers.

The fact that e-mentoring can be either synchronous or asynchronous raises the risk and the challenge of sustaining the relationship when partners are beyond each other's physical reach, being accessible or dependent purely on only by electronic means, therefore meaning that communication depends upon both parties readiness to open the line of communication. Haddock-Millar and Rigby's (2014) work on the Cabinet Office-backed *Public Sector Mentoring Scheme* referred to this as 'managing the down time' which has been quoted as being the main reason for partnership failure in a significant number of cases. The above challenge has links to the impact and importance of interaction frequency. De Janasz and Godshalk (2013) cite evidence which found frequent interaction to be positively related to both mentor and mentee perceptions of success and high interaction has been found to mediate e-mentoring program self-efficacy outcomes.

To conclude, the authors/ researchers regard a brief discussion of some of the guiding frameworks utilised in this pilot to encourage interaction worthwhile. Factors influencing the degree of success of a mentor-mentee relationship include the style, or range of styles, adopted by the mentor, an understanding of the stages that a relationship may, and possibly needs to evolve through, and an understanding of the key ingredients of success required for each mentor-mentee exchange. Klasen and Clutterbuck (2002) describe mentor styles in terms such a coach (sic), facilitator, counsellor and guardian depending upon the degree and balance between influence (directive or non-directive) and emotional or intellectual challenge. The stages that a relationship evolves through are described as rapport, direction, progress, maturation and close with the key variable related to each stage being 'intensity of learning'. Finally, to ensure that each exchange delivers optimum value each party needs to ensure a high clarity of purpose built on a foundation of high rapport. Given the context of this paper, to achieve this combination requires the cultivation and practice of highly valuable employability attributes.

METHODOLOGY

Between February 2014 and April 2014, twenty eight mentees and mentors, from Middlesex University Business School and individuals from supportive organizations in the financial and legal sectors respectively, participated in the GIGO scheme. The scheme was led by the first two authors of this paper. The primary research strategy was action research involving iterations of action and reflection, theory and practice shaped by perspectives of all participants at regular intervals (McNiff and Whitehead, 2009). The purpose of the ongoing and summative program evaluation is to understand the benefits for stakeholders, consider appropriate project adjustments or fundamental changes or even whether the program should continue. Being open to the unexpected outcomes and post-development outcomes is equally as important, as these can easily be missed if the evaluating team adopts a blinkered approach.

The Project Team utilised a mixed-method approach to address the following research objectives, namely to identify specific outcomes within individual mentoring partnerships; identify lessons for building relationships between HEIs and employers around recruitment, learning and development; evaluate the contribution of mentoring to the broader employability agenda, and identify the factors associated with a positive or negative experience of the Scheme.

Data Collection

The Project Team utilised a mixed-method approach including the facilitation of semi-structured interviews, focus groups and questionnaires, to provide qualitative, quantitative and visual data. Mentees were surveyed at the start of the program using the online *Survey Monkey* tool in order to capture the participants' profile to enable a comparison between the mentors and mentees, to evaluate participants experience and value of the recruitment process, project launch, and training/briefing and to capture participants' expectations and rationale for joining the scheme. At the conclusion of the eight-week program another online survey of mentees was undertaken to evaluate the mentees experience the virtual work experience and e-mentoring

relationship. This survey also provided an opportunity to capture qualitative responses for later thematic analysis. A third data set was generated at the conclusion of the program via a combination of online survey and one-to-one interviews to evaluate the mentors experience the e-mentoring relationship. In addition to this survey and interview data, an additional data set was available from FLSP which enabled the Project Team to determine the level of activity and engagement with the online materials.

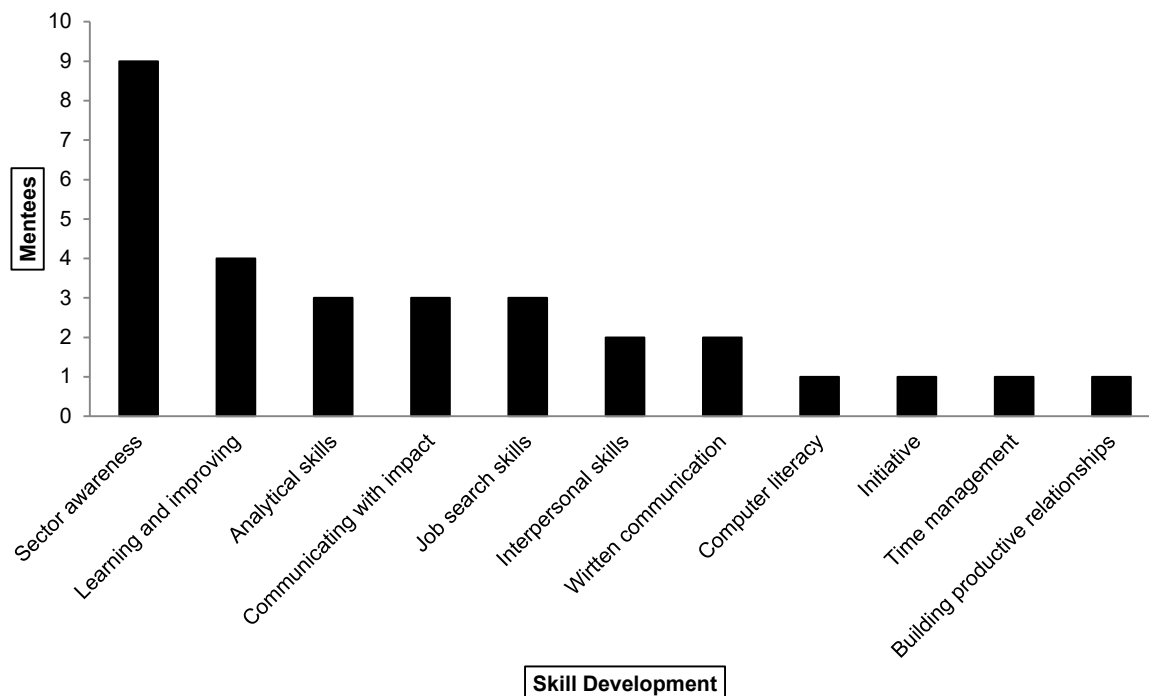
The strategy has provision to re-visit participants in May/June 2015 to evaluate advancement and seek to identify how the programme has contributed to this. Fourteen mentees commenced the programme on 1st March 2014, each supported by a mentor from the accounting and finance sector. The mentees were drawn from a range of Middlesex University Business School undergraduate programmes including Accounting and Finance, Business Accounting and Economics with an equal split of male and female mentees. Of those mentees that completed the baseline survey ($n=10$) 44.44% were aged 16-18, 44.44% were aged 19-24, 11.11% were aged 25-34. The majority of mentees were of Asian origin (55.55%), 22.22% were Black African, 11.11% White British and 11.11% White other. The Universities and College Admissions Service (UCAS) point entry ranged between 180 and 300. The mentors came from a range of public sector, private sector and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), including Standard Life, Bank of Scotland, Simply Health and the FLSP. Eight mentors were female and six were male.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mentees were asked why they wanted to join the program. Responses can be grouped into two categories. The first category was a desire to gain experience of virtual mentoring: *'I have never had the experience of being a mentee especially through a virtual way so this really caught my attention; for the experience of being virtually mentored by someone in the field.'* The second mentee driver was the desire to develop employability skills and sector knowledge: *'I think it's great to have on my CV and I will learn more about interviews and enhance my accounting skills; I wanted to increase my knowledge and receive valuable help from a mentor who will guide me to the right way of entering my career and to build a strong CV; It also allows me to ask questions regarding interview techniques with my mentor.'*

During the course of the mentor interviews, several reflected on the importance of mentoring, both for themselves and the mentees. Again the responses can be grouped into two categories. Some mentors wanted to gain experience of virtual mentoring: *'It was a development opportunity to learn about a new method of mentoring; my organization was offering the experience and I had never experienced e-mentoring previously.'* The other theme emerging was a desire to help others access the profession: *'University students don't always get the opportunity to have a business mentor straightaway; it is really good to actually help other younger people progress in their careers to get help as early.'* Finally, the baseline survey of mentees at the outset asked them to select three skills they most wanted to develop through the scheme - the results can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Mentee Skill Development Drivers



This chart illustrates that the most common reason cited for taking part in the GIGO e-mentoring programme was to develop greater awareness of the accountancy and finance sectors.

Mentee/Mentor Program Engagement

The level of engagement with the program was determined via data generated from the GIGO platform. Data was available for each mentee-mentor pairings under the seven headings shown below in Figure 2. As might be expected, engagement varied across the pairings with the two extremes are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Mentee and Mentor Program Engagement

Pairing Number	Units Complete	Mentee Time Spent on Site	Mentor Time Spent on Site	Mentee Messages Sent to Mentor	Mentor Messages Sent to Mentee	Mentee Number of Logins	Mentor Number of Logins
1	8	17 hrs 48 mins	9 hrs 37 mins	79	56	37	27
14	0	57 mins	2 hrs 24 mins	4	10	5	15

This table indicates how widely the interaction between mentor and mentee varied during the four week period of the GIGO programme.

Overall, seven mentees complete all eight online courses, six mentees complete between one and six courses, one mentee failed to complete any course. The mentee survey indicated that participants were very satisfied with the relationship engagement with their mentor. The majority (60%) of mentees felt that they had good rapport with their mentor and 40% felt that they had high rapport. All mentees felt that they achieved high clarity of purpose with their mentor. Mentees perceptions of the online GIGO course content and its contribution to their employability were also sought. The mentees were asked to rank the sector and employability scheme content from 1 – 4 in terms of value, 1 being the highest. Overall, the sector course driven content proved more valuable (60%) than the employability course driven content (40%). All survey

participants felt better prepared to enter the world of employment, 20% attributing this entirely to the FLSP programme and 80% attributing this to a large extent. When mentees were asked to rank the four sector-specific modules, two rated more highly than others, namely understanding the client and understanding the sector. Qualitative responses included: *'In every sector **understanding of client knowledge** it is very beneficial for a sector as well as if you have more knowledge about sector and the client your dealing with then you will understand your roles and responsibilities within the sector and also understating the risk of work your dealing within sector and the you are performing'*.

'Understanding the client and the sector were the most valuable courses I undertook, because of awareness of the financial sector as a whole. It let me become clear about the whole sector and procedures being undertaken inside the business and how to improve the business and what do the clients' needs are.' *'The reason why I rated the four sectors in that order, is that it's important for any individual to first **understand the sector** they are going into, then the roles and responsibilities they have to undertake. It's then very important to understand clients and what they expect from you and what their needs are.'* *'As someone in my shoes with a very limited **understanding of the sector** and what it entails, certainly, the course where I learned more of the sector was the most valuable. Knowing the sector is, to me, the fundamental building block to pursuing a career in the financial sector. Learning the roles and responsibilities in the sector was the second most valuable course because it gave me an insight into the different roles I could pursue in the sector and what they entail to being successful. A lot of these roles have client interaction at the fore therefore understanding the client was the third most valuable course. The least most valuable course for me at this point was understanding risk. While it was an interesting course, I think it will prove to be useful once I enter some of the management and higher stature roles in the sector rather than where I am now.'* For those students that have limited experience or no experience of the sector an introduction to the world of accounting and finance through virtual means can begin to develop the on-going process of capacity building (Yorke, 2006). Indeed, Knight and Yorke's (2004) model is particularly relevant here; mentees are developing workplace understanding and skills from both a client and sector perspective. When mentees were asked to rank the four employability-specific modules, 'communicating in a professional environment' rated more highly than others. Qualitative responses included:

'Communication is a core skill in any business and this is the skill employers first of all look at.' *'The reason why I rated this in this following order is, **individuals should know how to behave in a professional manner** in the sector, then it's important to make a great impression where you work so that staff there communicate with you freely and this leads to getting in and on with other staff there which I rated 3rd. Finally it's skills to success as you learn this on the go while doing your job and going ahead.'* *'**Getting In and Getting On** proved to be the most valuable course for me. This is because of, prior to the course, I had a very low understanding of the different ways of entering the industry. Without the knowledge of how to specifically get into the industry, all the other courses seem moot. The second valuable course for me was **making a good impression**. Now that I had some idea of the different paths of getting into the industry, I could focus on "Making a Good Impression" on employers and interviewers so that I could give myself the best chance of getting into the sector. This ties in also with the course "Communicating in a professional environment"'. The simple fact that mentees are given the opportunity to reflect on their professional development throughout the program through a variety of methods, can provide the catalyst to increase self-confident and self-awareness (Moon, 2004). Overwhelmingly, mentees felt that their communication skills had improved and their understanding of how to conduct themselves in a professional manner in the workplace. Pool and Sewell's (2007) essential components of employability are entirely relevant here, from the importance of reflection and evaluation, intrinsically linked to EI.*

Interviews with mentors suggested repeatedly that the program was and is 'fit for purpose' and appropriate for the first year undergraduate group; for example:

*“It is **fit-for-purpose** because if you look at the units that the young people work through **it is an introduction to the sector** and some of it gets quite involved ... researching a career as an actuary, a financial advisor, an accountant, different types of accountancy.”* (Mentor Interviewee, FLSP) *“Overall view of the programme: **really enjoyed taking part; great for me and him**; it was time pressured however, perhaps a longer window would deepen the value (for both of us).”* (Mentor Interview, Simply Health) *“Some of the questions and tasks assumed a certain level of prior knowledge, especially regarding ‘behind the scenes’ type roles e.g. back office activity, Actuarial roles – would be useful to provide an overview or some insights into this type of work. The content was appealing to first years (University students) than I think it would be later on ... **it’s a good introduction**. I think if you were in your final year at University with exams going on, I don’t think you would be as committed to it, I think it is quite useful for first years or second years quite early on.”* (Mentor Interviewee, FLSP)

Here we can see that the timing of the program is important. At what point of an undergraduate students’ journey should the programme be introduced? It is clear that both mentees and mentors felt that the beginning of a degree program provides the best opportunity to engage with the scheme, developing knowledge and skills which can inform and support further study. The pairs that completed the program reported a high degree of purpose and focus, supported by strong rapport. In all these mentoring pairs, participants felt that the mentoring relationship had reached the maturity stage having established and maintained rapport, setting direction, progressing and maturing (Clutterbuck and Klasen, 2002). In the majority of these pairs, the mentee was based in London and the mentor was based in Scotland.

What this demonstrates is that the challenge of geographical distance can be overcome by e-mentoring (Scandura and Hamilton, 2003). Furthermore, whilst the relationships were conducted entirely by email and the website platform which facilitated online discussion, the loss of visual cues and body language do not appear to have presented a barrier for the participants that completed the program (Bierema and Hill, 2005). When asked about the style of mentoring, mentees and mentors felt that the style adopted was predominantly that of a coach or facilitator (Klasen and Clutterbuck, 2002). The characteristics of these styles included collaboration, challenge and critical friendship. In the majority of pairs the mentees felt very comfortable with the mentors’ form of questioning, choice of language and engaging approach to the course content. The mentees felt sufficiently stretched and challenged, whilst at the same time acknowledging the supportive style of the mentors.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to provide researchers and practitioners with the building blocks to evaluate a project of this type and identify the extent to which the aims and objectives of the key stakeholders of the project have been achieved. The methodology guiding both the project and the research by the authors was action research and the data collection a combination of qualitative survey of participants via online Survey Monkey supplemented by qualitative one-to-one interviews with mentors and focus groups with mentees. The primary findings of the paper are that the Get in-Get-on e-mentoring platform, originally designed for and targeted at a 16-19 year old audience for the purpose of enhancing employability, is perfectly ‘fit-for-purpose’ with an older audience, namely first year undergraduates in a UK university.

The survey and interview data demonstrated a unanimous positive response from mentees. The mentees are now more aware of the range of opportunities available in the sector and the skills needed to succeed. Communicating in a professional environment was the most significant developmental area for mentees. A second objective was also unanimously achieved according to mentee respondents who now believe they are better informed of the range of career opportunities available to them and therefore able to make clearer career choices. Another objective was to determine whether the GIGO content and format would be applicable to a slightly older audience than it was initially designed for. The data from both mentees and mentors suggests that the model is an ‘ideal’ fit for first year undergraduate students. The general consensus

is that undergraduate students need to think about their employability from the time of entering Higher Education; waiting until the second or third year can put students at a distinct disadvantage to those that have established networks. Prior to this programme the GIGO platform had been designed to support sixth formers at QCF Level 3 to develop priority skills and competencies. However, feedback suggested that the learning content is just as relevant for undergraduates. There is also evidence that the program offers the opportunity for both mentee and mentor to develop their respective professional practice. For mentees, the greatest opportunity is to learn from someone experienced in the sector, developing their knowledge of the sector, raising awareness of roles and opportunities available to continually develop their work-related skills. For mentors, the greatest opportunity is to develop their mentoring capability and adaptability in a variety of dimensions including guiding, coaching and facilitating learning.

Whilst there is confirmation of great strengths in the GIGO there are other areas where the program might be strengthened further. Examples include consideration of how to strengthen rapport in a purely email mentoring relationship and how to establish the appropriate duration for the program for ensuring that benefits are optimised and realised without this voluntary engagement impinging upon other commitments and priorities. There is also an issue to be aware of regarding the briefing of mentors and mentees prior to matching. In this program mentors were trained and briefed by Brightside; mentees were trained and briefed by Middlesex University staff. Whilst there is little evidence from this research that this caused an issue, in order to reduce the risk of misunderstanding arising it may be worth considering closer liaison and alignment of messages and theoretical underpinnings prior to training of both mentors and mentees.

Overall, the majority stakeholder aims and objectives were met. The majority of participants felt that they had enhanced their employability skills and through their mentoring relationships developed a greater awareness of the attributes required to succeed in the financial service and accountancy sector. The majority of mentees felt better able to make career choices going into their second year of studies. The pilot scheme has given the FLSP confidence that the ‘model’ including the platform and program content are suitable for first year undergraduate students. The results are relevant to both researchers and academics engaged in developing the Higher Education curriculum and supporting students’ employability and successful career transitions. The limitations of the research are that whilst the results are reliable and internally valid the relatively small sample size and the peculiar nature of this Get in-Get on programme renders generalisation towards other e-mentoring programmes less valid. Investigation of other mentee experience plus research to track participant experiences subsequently (downstream), particularly of mentees gaining employment appropriate to their graduate status and relative to their degree discipline would strengthen the research and confidence in promotion of the platform .

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