Learning From Those Who Have Done it Before' - Peer to Peer Employability Coaching and Mentoring: A Case Study of Bournemouth University in the UK

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Introduction

While in the US, undergraduate academic programs may have a component of an internship, in the United Kingdom there is often a mandatory work-based experience incorporated into the degree. Termed as a 'sandwich placement', this experience takes place during the third year of a four-year undergraduate course. This important provision in preparing students for employment is set against the backdrop of sector wide institutional pressures such as austerity in staff resourcing, frequent organisational restructures, and a decrease in student engagement. At the same time, the UK Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and the National Student Survey (NSS) feed into national league tables where all universities are ranked. Despite this, providing work placement opportunities for students has grown in popularity in the UK, with Bournemouth University having one of the largest number of placement students. Such placements may be a mandatory component of the degree programme (particularly in business, media and health disciplines) or optional. Bournemouth University has supported an increase in the number of students selecting programs through offering this additional opportunity to all students, to develop the knowledge and skills to prepare them for graduate employment.

Preparation and support for placement students is provided by professional services staff and, to a lesser extent, academic staff. However, it has become clear over the past few years that post-placement students themselves have extensive knowledge and experience that they can (and do) share with other students, via formal activities such as guest lectures or less formally through social media discussions (e.g. on Facebook). To understand whether this 'sharing' could be harnessed more effectively, this current study seeks to explore the impact and effectiveness of peer-to-peer coaching and mentoring between undergraduate students with a required academic component of a sandwich placement. Currently at Bournemouth University, the Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) program has proven to be very popular with students as second year students support groups of first year students on various topics of university life. While similar peer-to-peer learning has been proven to improve the transition to university life and create greater confidence in students (Briggs, Clark and Hall 2012; Hughes and Smail 2015; Gale and Parker 2014), the particular focus on employability and the transition to the sandwich placement is less explored and understood.

The research objectives stem from how a coaching and mentoring initiative can impact both first and final year placement students. For first year students, this is to explore their awareness of their own employability, their responsibility in the process, awareness of resources available to them both on and off campus, and any change in confidence and knowledge as a result of being coached and mentored by a peer over a period of time. For final year students, it is to explore how they can develop the coaching and mentoring skills that will enhance their employability when they graduate and what impact being a coach/mentor has had on their own development.

These research objectives used Bournemouth University as a case study with a theoretical framework based upon Vygotsky's (1978) 'Zones of Proximal Development, Kolb's 'Experiential Learning' (1984), and Whitmore's

Coaching for Performance' (1984) to underpin the study. This framework encompasses how students learn from their peers (Vygotsky), how they learn from doing (Kolb), and how using coaching and mentoring principles can help in the articulation and reflection of this learning (Whitmore). Coaching has already proven to be a more cost-effective method of achieving retention of and completion gains for students when compared to previously studied interventions (Baker and Bettinger 2011). Whitmore's GROW Model of Coaching is one of the most used coaching models globally and is already used within Bournemouth University to support students, so would be familiar to the sample group. Using this framework enables a range of issues to be explored simultaneously, supporting a more holistic understanding of the whole experience for all the students involved.

The project

Following a briefing to first and final year students in the Department of Marketing and Corporate Communications at Bournemouth University, 14 students came forward to volunteer; seven first year students on the common academic pathway and seven final year post-placement PR students, all of whom are required to complete a placement as part of their degree. They were randomly paired up, with each pair comprising an M-Coach (Mentoring Coach) and an M-Coachee (Mentoring Coachee). As part of the preparation for the study, the M-Coaches were supported to provide both coaching and mentoring, dependent on the conversational and developmental needs of the M-Coachee. Each pair was then prompted to meet up either virtually (via email or Skype) or face-to-face once a month over the next 6 months and were provided with questions and prompts around placements and employability to guide the discussion. Full ethical approval was provided before the commencement of the study.

In using an interpretive case study framework, (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2018), face-to-face semi structured interviews were held at three points during the project. The first interviews took place at the very beginning of the project, the second at the end, and the third three months following the programme end to establish ongoing impact. While it was possible to speak to all participants at the first stage, I was only able to speak to the five pairs that successfully completed the project at the second stage. For the third stage, evaluating the ongoing impact, this proved to be quite difficult given the geographical spread of both the newly finished final year students. This provided a holistic understanding of their expectations, experiences and the outcomes of the coaching and mentoring activities.

Student feedback from the initial interviews was used in the development of the project, particularly in the number of intervention sessions, the timing of these interventions, content covered in the creation of session guidelines, and the timing of the interventions. Guidelines were provided to accompany each session highlighting services available to students on campus, both internal and external resources for placement search, tips for interviews, and how to stay positive in negative times. It was at this time that the GROW Coaching Model was introduced as a key method to help resilience and increase confidence in themselves. The rationale behind this project was to raise their awareness of the placement journey, resources available to them, and the one to one relationship to encourage greater confidence and ownership in their employability.

Participants were also prompted to complete a short online survey following each intervention session to build up a timeline of their reactions and reflections to each session and to gauge how their knowledge, skills and confidence had increased incrementally over the course of the project. Additionally, one to one interviews are planned four months after the project finish date to evaluate the impact of the project on confidence, activities, aspirations and expertise upon graduation (M-Coaches) or commencement of Year 2 studies (M-Coachees).

At the end of the six month period, the impact has been substantial for both participant groups, based on the verbal and survey data received to date. The M-Coaches reported that the development of the relationship with their M-Coachee will extend beyond the project and that they had gained a sense of pride in helping their younger peers, as well as feeling a greater sense of self-empowerment in their own abilities to support and mentor younger colleagues. The M-Coachees were the first amongst their peers to have work-focused LinkedIn accounts, to proactively get

involved on campus, and to investigate work experience opportunities for the future – having the confidence and knowledge to take on a much more proactive role at an early stage of their placement journey. All students have gained additional knowledge and skills that they will inform and support their placement or graduate employment opportunities. Perhaps one of the most interesting findings has been the relationships that have developed between the M-Coaches and M-Coachees. These seem to have enabled more meaningful conversations and exchanges than those they also have university staff in terms of discussing issues in a 'freer' and more egalitarian way.

Conclusion

The initial results suggest that an employability focused peer assisted learning program can create a lasting and positive impact on students. The participants have shown that they value this kind of peer relationship in addition to support from university staff, given the mandatory sandwich placement requirement. The results also suggest that an intervention that is focused around how students can learn from their peers, how they can learn from doing and how coaching and mentoring can encourage and support the reflection of this learning can be effective and impactful.

Across the higher education sector, universities are looking for resource-efficient yet innovative and effective ways to support students going into and coming out of work placements. This small-scale study suggests that peer-to-peer student coaching and mentoring may be one such route to build the confidence and knowledge of those preparing for placement and develop coaching and mentoring skills for those about to go into employment.

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