

EMPLOYER MENTORING FOR POST GRADUATE RESEARCHERS (PGRs) Pilot Evaluation



In 2015, we launched a pilot employer mentoring scheme for PGRs as a joint project between the Researcher Developer Programme (RDP) and SEPnet (South East Physics network). It complements three other peer mentoring schemes for PGRs/ECRs at Surrey managed by RDP.

The aims of the scheme are:

- To increase awareness of career options for doctorates in business/industry and to help them better manage the transition from academic study to work
- To boost employability by developing transferable skills such as self-presentation and time management
- To build a network of personal contacts for both career development and collaboration.

The pilot saw 20 mentoring pairs set up, of which half involved physics students and half other disciplines such as Music and Politics. Mentors were sourced from existing employer contacts as well as new leads from networking events and personal contacts. Employers ranged from large organisations such as the National Physical Laboratory and CGI Group to SMEs, a University IP officer and a freelance composer/musician. The pilot was intentionally 'light touch', with the option of 'one off' or 'ongoing' mentoring (a minimum of 4 points of contact in a year).

Parties were briefed individually at the outset and provided with supporting guidance materials. Mentees were expected to drive the process once matched with a mentor and to meet face to face, use Skype, phone/email or any combination of these. Providing feedback was integral to the pilot so its effectiveness could be evaluated.

FEEDBACK

All mentees and mentors were asked to complete a short feedback form with a mixture of number rated questions (marked out of 10) and free comment questions. The response rate was 90% for mentors and 80% for mentees. Participants were asked about the practicalities of the scheme (eg number of meetings, comments on organisation and supporting materials) as well as how well the scheme met its aims and the benefits to mentees/mentors. Mentors were more critically analytical than mentees on how well the process met its aims in the context of their mentee and displayed a clearer insight into how the scheme aligned with their personal/corporate goals. There was also a wider range of scores and comments than for mentees, reflecting the fact that successful outcomes depend on the individual mentee's motivation and drive.

MENTEES

General impressions

The pilot was well received by mentees, with over half rating it as 9/10 or 10/10, the lowest score being 7/10. Mentees had between 1 and 5 points of contact with their mentor, most of which were face to face (80%). In terms of the pilot's aims, mentees rated career development/managing the transition to paid work most highly, followed by networking/collaboration and then skills development.

Issues covered

Mentoring covered a range of issues, from career options, CVs/applications and the mentee's PhD to how to transform an idea into a business plan and ways to improve spoken English. The 'inside knowledge' mentors provided was highly valued by mentees

and allowed many to explore their career ideas in a more purposeful and informed way, drawing on mentors' real life experiences.

Benefits to mentees

When asked about the benefits to mentees, CV enhancement and information/advice about career options were most frequently mentioned. Others developed better communication and presentation skills (of self, ideas), increased confidence and networking advice. In 3 cases there were more tangible benefits: a short term placement with the mentor's organisation; invite to attend a large orchestral recording session and network with composers/musicians; the chance to write a published article for 'The Conversation', an online media outlet providing informed commentary on global issues sourced from the academic/research community. For 1 mentor, the best thing about the scheme was its light touch; 'the mentee is free to determine the parameters within which the mentor-mentee relationship is useful'.

Potential changes

7 students suggested additional offers as well as mentoring, many of which are already provided by SEPnet, albeit for physics PGRs only. These include:

- work shadowing/short internships for PhDs
- wider range of mentors to allow a closer match to PhD subject
- employer feedback on CVs
- speed networking event with employers
- case studies of successful mentoring pairs and,
- securing buy-in from supervisors to promote/support the scheme.

MENTORS

General impressions

There was a wider range of scores compared with mentees on how they rated the scheme against its aims and the overall logistics. Mentors rated the overall experience between 3/10 and 10/10 although over 75% rated it at 7/10 or more. On the scheme's aims, as with mentees, mentors rated career development/managing the transition most highly (over 75% rated this at 7/10 or higher), while skills development was slightly ahead of networking. Over 75% rated organisation of the process as 7/10 or higher while 55% said the same for supporting materials. The latter reflects that some didn't use/read the guidance and/or had prior experience of mentoring through work/IOP etc.

Several employers commented that, because of the 'light touch' nature of the scheme, 'outcomes were highly dependent on the drive of the mentee'. As a result, scores for mentee preparation varied from 5/10 to 10/10, with over 80% rating preparation as 7/10 or more. Mentees were less good at staying in contact: several students weren't proactive in communicating with their mentors, with some long gaps between points of contact. While mentors were tolerant of this, they wanted to be 'kept in the loop' more effectively.

Issues discussed

These ranged from securing funding, CV writing, PhD related advice (defending arguments, publishing), ideas about companies that might benefit from the mentee's research and skills development (handling people, presentations). A few mentors thought their input was limited because they were either matched with someone in a different specialism and/or their mentee's aims didn't match those of the scheme, eg

one mentee was focused on securing 'top-up' funding while another wanted to work in finance but their mentor was a research scientist.

Benefits to mentors

Most frequently mentioned by mentors was the chance to reflect on their own personal style. For example, "I am naturally a 'do-er'. This process made me sit back and get X to get to the solution himself". Other benefits included:

- stronger links with Surrey
- development of skills - personal leadership, communication, advising
- insight into a new discipline/the problems faced by mature students
- the chance to employ a mentee on a short placement
- mentoring experience outside the mentor's organisation

For 1 mentor, they were pleased to have gained a 'really intelligent and high achieving contact', which demonstrates that networking can work both ways!

Potential changes

There were 9 replies from the 18 respondents. Several mentors would welcome more interaction with other mentors/mentees, with 1 suggesting a speed networking event to help mentees choose their mentor at the outset. Mentors were keen to 'normalise' the activity for mentees as well as having the opportunity to share experiences. Other suggestions included:

- ensuring a close match between the background/interests of mentees and mentors
- making more information available about the student beforehand
- ensuring mentees have specific goals before mentoring starts and are clear about the career planning aims of the scheme
- advice/case studies on what can go wrong during mentoring and what action to take

One mentor was so positive about the scheme that he suggested it start earlier in the academic year and involve more meetings!

CONCLUSION

From an institutional perspective, we have learnt that:

- A 'bank' of mentors is preferable so we can offer students more choice.
- Engaging students is harder than employers. Case studies and educating supervisors about the benefits of mentoring will help here.
- The balance between encouraging mentees to communicate regularly with their mentors and allowing them to 'drive' the process is a fine one.
- Employers value a close match between their background and that of the mentee and rely on mentees being focused on career development goals.
- Managing a scheme is time-consuming, especially if you build it up one mentor at a time and can't benefit from economies of scale in advertising opportunities and briefing mentees/mentors at one time.

At its best, employer mentoring for PGRs has been very positive, for both mentees and mentors. Mentors have the opportunity to step back and reflect on their personal style of working, while gaining an insight into different academic disciplines. Mentees benefited from inside knowledge of a specific business area while also getting an

independent perspective on their skills and experience. As one student said; 'as a result of this process, I learnt a lot about what kind of career I was looking for and how to present a good CV. This has made me very confident in myself'. This student went on to secure a job in the sector she wanted and in the specific locality she'd targeted for personal reasons, balancing career and life goals.

Case Study

Mentee: Ryan Wilkinson, PhD student in Nuclear Physics, University of Surrey

Mentor: Dr Chris Brunskill, Space Applications Catapult (SatApps Catapult), Harwell

Background

Ryan and Chris were paired for mentoring in May 2015 as part of a pilot scheme launched at the University of Surrey. Ryan has a first degree in Astrophysics from the University of Liverpool and was in the second year of a PhD in Experimental Nuclear Physics at Surrey at the time. He signed up for mentoring to:

- gain first-hand careers advice from people working outside academia, especially on the transition from academia to an industrial/commercial research environment, and
- to help narrow down the career options available to him post-PhD.

Chris is an electronics engineer and was Upstream Technologies Lead at SatApps Catapult at the time of mentoring. This involves responsibility for engagement with technology developers and suppliers in/for the UK space industry, with the aim of discovering and demonstrating the latest innovations in satellite technology.

The process

During the pilot, Chris and Ryan met three times face to face, as well as exchanging several emails. Issues discussed ranged from the transition from academic to non-academic research, the pros and cons of different career options, how a business idea can be developed and advice on how to enhance a CV.

Benefits of mentoring

Ryan says, "a real highlight was the personal history and insight from my mentor, and how his experience can give me something to think about regarding my own career progression. Having a mentor meant I could travel to SatApps Catapult and meet people from industry. I found this particularly good at helping hone my networking skills. The main things I learnt were specifics about timescales and options about what I can do in the run up to the end of my PhD and afterwards. I learnt a lot from Chris's own experience post-PhD. This type of informal meeting style suited my needs perfectly".

And the best thing about the mentoring scheme, "there aren't any particular 'rules' to follow. The mentee is free to determine the parameters within which the mentor-mentee relationship is useful. My mentor has been very good in being flexible to my personal needs of what I would like to gain from the mentoring experience."

From Chris' perspective, the best outcome from mentoring was the peer support and insight he could provide into the transition from academia. He also found it a good method for building his own personal leadership and communication skills.