Policymakers, practitioners and academics working together to explore the role of the work-based mentor on the social work apprenticeship programme

UKRI Policy Support Fund

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The Social Work Apprenticeship at UoS

- We started working with Local Authority partners in April 2018 to develop the programme
- Approved by University and HCPC in July 2019 & subsequently approved by Social Work England
- First intake of 25 apprentices started September 2019 and graduated in 2022
- We now have approximately 120 apprentices on our programme across the 3 years – with our third cohort about to graduate
- 3 year programme leading to BA (Hons) degree and professional social work qualification, enabling successful apprentices to apply for registration as a Social Worker with Social Work England
- PGDip route to start from September 2024
- Close partnership between employers and University

Apprenticeships

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Support for mentors

- Initial information sessions for mentors (first cohort) – learning together
- Starting point: the basics – what is the apprenticeship about and what is the role of the mentor? What goes in the tripartite document? Collating exemplars.
- Developed brief written guidance for mentors
- One tutor (DS) took responsibility for coordinating mentor support – recognised that this needed explicit attention
- Finding allies - asked mentors and other academic staff to lead or co-lead sessions
- Developing a rolling programme, but always adding to this
- Attendance certificates offered which can be used for PSRB requirements (particularly peer reflection)
- Developing a repository for information – Teams was the starting point but Padlet became the preferred option
- Co-producing more detailed mentor guidance with mentors who were very engaged
- Theoretical underpinnings of communities of practice and co-production – loosely applied
- Male and Murray's (2005) typology adopted to help us think about shifting apprentice identities. Key concepts of 'Expert Become Novice' and 'Novice Assumed to be Expert'

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How the research came about

- A core group of mentors had formed over time
- Looking at existing research on apprenticeships and mentors, we were aware there was a gap
- The University put out an open application call for funding from the UKRI Policy Support Fund – an ideal opportunity
- Successful application and ethical approval granted
- Steering group established

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Methodology

- Qualitative approach
- Steering group consulted on participant information sheets and interview schedule; also helped with recruitment
- Aimed to interview up to 15 mentors – but 24 volunteered! 2 later withdrew and 1 excluded after interview so 21 participants in total
- Most were employed by local authorities; variety of experience
- Semi-structured interviews lasting between 30-60 minutes about their experience of the mentor role
- Recorded with permission and transcribed
- Initial framework analysis based on interview schedule
- Moving into more detailed thematic analysis

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Key findings

- The varying routes into becoming a mentor
- Understanding the role
- Benefits to being a mentor v time and commitment
- Blended support from university and employers
- Transferable knowledge, skills and behaviours
- Policy into practice developments

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The varying routes into becoming a mentor

- Expectation of current role
- Came with promotion to a senior role
- Applying for a specific post
- Pre-existing relationship
- Asked individually by a manager to do it
- Volunteered following a request to the team
- 'Volunteered' – sometimes without realizing
- Accidental
- Externally commissioned

"So I had an e-mail land, saying I was a mentor [laughs]. So I think they'd been asked to put people forward, but I hadn't, it hadn't been discussed with me or anything, so I just got an e-mail saying "Thank you for being a mentor", erm, so I'd messaged my manager saying, "Er, have you put me forward for this?" and she went, "Oh yeah, I meant to speak to you..." Erm, but to be honest, I then just read it and thought actually, yeah, I'd quite like to do that. Erm, I think if I'd been consulted before, it would have been the same answer anyway. Erm, so yes, that's how I became a mentor."

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Understanding the role

- Underselling or not explaining extent of the role
- Limited information – or too much
- Support sessions were helpful – but not always able to attend due to workload pressures
- Resources such as the Padlet were useful
- Advice from experienced colleagues
- Lack of formal / written guidance within organisations
- Assumed skills

"…essentially I was kind of informed, erm, you know, it's just somebody to go to if they need advice, whereas actually it's not that at all."

P5

"When I got the, the mentors' guidance […] it was just like, […] this is not what I thought this was going to be whatsoever […] And I think a lot of my contemporaries […] were thinking exactly the same that this is, this is more than we signed up for and it was overwhelming as well, the amount of sessions that [the University] were providing."

P7

"I think it was just assumed because we were quite an experienced practice educator that we just didn't need any training." P18

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Benefits to being a mentor v time commitment

- Consistent relationship – ongoing support
- Genuinely caring about the apprentice
- Wanting to prioritise the apprentice's needs
- Satisfaction from seeing apprentice develop and grow in confidence
- Professional development for mentor
- Re-connecting with theory and research
- Strengthening links with the University

"For the most part I enjoy it, because it's that development of people and helping and seeing them grow… I think the other bit is it does take a lot of my time and attention." P14

"It was good in terms of my own career progression of that experience of supervising someone… It's been really lovely, to see his career progress, you know, get him through to qualifying, erm, you know he's now a social worker… so a colleague." P12

"I think it's… a sense of achievement, because obviously you can see the development of that apprentice and you can see them developing their confidence and you can see them developing their skills and their knowledge. And you can kind of support them to draw out their own learning. And it's rewarding in that sense to see how far they've come really over the course of the time I'm working with them." P22

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Transferable knowledge, skills and behaviours

- Different views about who should be a mentor
- Progression opportunity
- Being a Practice Educator helped
- Management experience
- Previous apprentices as mentors
- Managers may be 'out of the loop'

"I'm lucky enough to be a practice educator so I could transfer some of my skills there. But the manager of my student kind of struggled because of the expectation at first when the student started, she wasn't clear about the expectation. No one really sat her down to explain." P23

"It's kind of difficult, isn't it, because you wouldn't want to exclude people… your kind of gut reaction is that people should have an 'ology' or some experience of mentoring and that sort of thing. But some people really take to it, some people are just really, really excellent at it and really, really like it." P1

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Benefits of blended support from university and employers

"I want [Apprentice] to have the best experience that she can and and I and I don't want […] to be the reason why she didn't get the best experience that she should have, because I wasn't aware of things."
P9

"It was just really the university support. I mean, in terms of support from the authority, it was basically just, you know, is everything OK with the apprentice? Are you managing? But not like what do you think you need, you know, is there any kind of training? Is there any kind of mentor sessions?"
P11

- Support from the University was helpful
  - 'Formal' e.g. support sessions / Padlet
  - 'Informal' e.g. advice given during tripartite progress reviews
- Learning from the apprentice 'mentoring the mentor'
- Some employers had created additional resources / support
  - Joint webinar with University
  - Peer support forum for mentors
  - Support from managers / WF Leads / more experienced colleagues
- Employers generally had no written guidance

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Policy into practice guidance

"I think if, if you're going to take this role on as just part of your day job, you will be surprised at how much time it takes and how much input is required. So that that would be my advice. It is more than what it said on the tin initially."
P10

"It has impacted on my workload, you know, erm and things like that aren't really factored in when you're looking at numbers for how many families I work with and that kind of thing. And… it just would have helped me to maybe have those discussions with my manager before saying yes"
P5

"…people are all individuals and some people require more support, some people require less or different, different types of support. But I think some overarching guidance or policy that wasn't too prescriptive or obviously micromanaging it."
P1

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Next steps

- We have impact funding to run some workshops to disseminate the findings from the research and develop some employer guidance in conjunction with the workforce development leads
- We intend to co-produce 'skeleton' guidance which employers can then adapt for their own organisation
- Continue to develop mentor support sessions and share good practice with other apprenticeship programmes in the University
- Specific consideration of the needs of non-local authority employers

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Reference

Murray, J. and Male, T. (2005) 'Becoming a Teacher Educator: Evidence from the Field', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21(2), pp. 125 - 142.

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