

## **TITLE: Do Postgraduate taught students need support? Evaluation of socio-cultural coaching to support transition and career enhancement**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The journey through university can be challenging. Universities typically provide information and services to help students transition into and through their programmes. Taught postgraduate (PGT) students felt they were neglected and highlighted that there is no support structure specifically for their transition and employability. Consequently, the **“SUCCESS PLUS” (Socio-cultural Coaching for Careers and Employability to Support Success: Pathways for Life Underpinning Success)** programme was developed and implemented in two Masters programmes at Aberdeen University. This programme provided extended support to socio-culturally diverse PGT students towards holistic development and enhanced employability using life coaching approaches. PGT students were matched with mentors, who had transitioned across subject disciplines and geographical areas themselves, as closely as possible based on career journeys. After nine months, the programme was evaluated using qualitative research methodology. Four focus groups and 17 in-depth interviews were conducted with mentees and mentors respectively.

Mentors and mentees suggested that their motivation for participation was that there was a gap or need for this kind of programme, because there was no support scheme for PGTs within the School. Specific acknowledgement of the short transition period of one year in MSc programmes; international students adjusting to the UK education system; and those returning to study after a gap was identified. Meanwhile, the opportunity to have conversations with mentors who have had similar career paths and share experiences, plus the breaking down of barriers and hierarchy, were highlighted by mentees. The value of this in relation to understanding hierarchy and alleviating sensitivities, especially around shyness among some cultures and being used to rote learning, was expressed. Mentees saw this as a space to receive pastoral care, use mentors as sounding boards for professional development and future career and employability. Managing expectations, training for mentors and better tailored matched were identified as areas for improvement.

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### **BACKGROUND**

Recent years show wider participation in higher education globally (Gale & Parker, 2013), and the internationalization of higher education has resulted in more diverse student populations (Bunney, Sharplin, & Howitt, 2015; Nelson, Kift, Humphreys, & Harper, 2006). In 2018, UK remained the second most popular destination for international students to study globally, mainly postgraduate taught (PGT) studies (HESA 2018). Supporting diverse groups of students, transitioning to and through higher education, is a priority for most Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

Teaching and learning approaches towards diverse PGT student populations are expected to address the seven ‘facets of Masterfulness’ proposed by Learning from International Practice (LFIP) in the Taught Postgraduate Student Experience project framework to develop Master’s level professionalism and competence (QAA 2013). However, students transitioning to PGT studies are commonly in a stage of ‘unconscious incompetence’ at first (Beeler 1991). While trying to

comprehend the academic challenges, PGT students (including UK and international students) frequently experience difficulties around proficiency of language, financial constraints, personal safety in an unfamiliar environment, accommodation, culture shock, changes from prior education and previous disciplinary exposure (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Counsell 2011; Bamber, Choudhary, Hislop, & Lane, 2017; Gbadamosi, 2018).

While there is a substantial body of evidence on strategies to facilitate the successful transition of first year students to university (e.g., Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015; Thomas, 2012), there is a dearth of information relating to transitions at PGT level (Jevons and Lindsay 2018). There is an assumption that postgraduate students have the skills required to smoothly transition to PGT study (O'Donnell et al., 2009). However, several studies have highlighted PGT transition as daunting a prospect as when students begin their undergraduate degrees (Hussey and Smith 2010, McMillan W 2014; Bunney et al 2017), stemming from time away from studies, feeling out of their comfort zones and being in a different discipline and/or education system (Bennett and Turner 2012). 80% of postgraduate respondents described the transition as 'overwhelming' (Cluett and Skene, 2006) and 64% as 'difficult' (West 2012). In spite of this, PGT student support needs are not addressed by universities (Kinash and Crane 2016) and are more pronounced around the PGT population (MacPherson, Punch and Graham 2017).

We developed a socio-cultural coaching programme to support PGT transition, "**SUCCESS PLUS**" (Socio-cultural Coaching for Careers and Employability to Support Success: Pathways for Life Underpinning Success) and conducted an evaluation. The underpinning concept is the use of 'matched' mentors to the socio-culturally diverse postgraduate students. PGT students were mentored using life coaching approaches towards holistic development. Two of our Masters programmes were chosen to pilot SUCCESS PLUS. Mentors were recruited using a snowballing technique to identify those who transitioned across subject disciplines, geographical areas and have experience of teaching and supporting postgraduate students for several years. In September 2018, a short questionnaire survey was conducted to obtain demographics, work experience, expectations of studying in the UK, career aspirations and developing graduate attributes to help with the matching process. Each student was then matched to a mentor as closely as possible with career journeys. Mentors and students were provided with guidance on the remit of the programme along with suggestions on frequency of meetings and mode of contact/mentoring. After nine months, the programme was evaluated to assess the feasibility and acceptability of SUCCESS PLUS. Our main objectives were to assess student satisfaction; mentor experiences and views of the programme; if the programme improved learning support and experience for students, to contribute to the literature gap.

## **METHODS**

A qualitative study was conducted using focus group discussions (FGDs) with students and individual telephone interviews with mentors. This research is epistemologically grounded in social constructionism (Crotty 2003), based on the notion that meaning is constructed through social interaction rather than within each individual. Multiple perspectives and interpretations of reality were collected to gain understanding of students' and mentors' experiences (Morgan and Krueger 1993). All students from the two Masters programmes who participated in SUCCESS PLUS (n=42) and all mentors (n=34) were eligible to participate in the evaluation.

Topic guides for FGDs and interviews were designed by the authors, who developed SUCCESS PLUS and were also mentors. These explored the process of mentoring, engagement (including barriers and facilitators), expectations, training needs and suggestions for improvement.

## DATA COLLECTION

After obtaining ethical approval from the University of Aberdeen College Ethics Review Board (CERB) (Ref: CERB/2019/5/1785), eligible students and mentors were invited to participate via email, with attached information sheet, eliciting a convenience sample for both groups. Students were invited to attend one of four FGDs of up to 1-hour duration conducted on campus in August 2019, after completing their taught courses and beginning searches for jobs/further opportunities. One-to-one telephone interviews of approximately 20-30 minutes' duration were conducted with mentors in August 2019. The FGDs and interviews were conducted by an independent researcher (female, recently studied a different Masters programme) to reduce investigator bias. Prior to conducting the FGDs/interviews, participants were asked to sign a consent form, in person on the day of the focus group discussion or returned electronically for mentors. All FGDs and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

## DATA ANALYSIS

A thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was conducted using an inductive approach with themes identified from the researchers' interpretations of the data in the context of the aims and objectives of the study.

The four core research team members (AP, LCAC, LMC, HMM) independently reviewed and coded inductively: four mentor transcripts (five for HMM) of a total n=17; two mentee focus groups transcripts of a total n=4 (two researchers per transcript, so each was coded twice by mixed pairs working independently); and one additional mentor interview transcript coded by another member of the team and selected at random to double check interview coding. The team members identified and summarised their coding using a template or by annotating the source documents. One author (HMM) extracted and synthesised all identified themes into a draft code book (initially split by mentor and mentee data sources separately). After checking the data again in sequence (LMC, LCAC followed by AP), a refined code book was developed by HMM (mentor and mentee themes now merged). This code book was then applied to the original data sources systematically to produce the final thematic analysis and identified the themes.

## FINDINGS

### Sample

Seventeen individual, one-to-one mentor interviews were conducted by face-to-face or telephone and four focus groups were held with twelve students, on campus, face-to-face. This evaluation sample represents 59% of the mentors and 17% of the mentees.

### Themes

We identified six core themes within and across mentor and mentee data:

1. (Diversity of) Motivations for participation
2. Matchmaking (was key)
3. Who made the first move (was emphasised)

4. (There were a range of) Models of engagement and experiences
5. Expectations (varied and were variously met/unmet)
6. Improvements (need to be made) for Sustainability

### **1. *(Diversity of) Motivations for participation***

Many participants in the evaluation, both mentors and mentees, suggested that their motivation was that there was a gap in support for PGT students, while support schemes exist for taught undergraduates and postgraduate researchers. Need for support during the short transition period of one year in Masters programmes, international students adjusting to the UK education system, and those returning to study after a gap were evident as underlying reasons. Mentors expressed a desire to participate because of their interest in, experience of or passion for supporting students, commitment to role modelling or succession planning, and to sharing their personal journeys. Meanwhile, opportunities to have conversations with mentors who have had similar career paths, and to share experiences, plus the breaking down of barriers and hierarchy, were highlighted by mentees. Both mentors and mentees valued the opportunity to have extra/co-curricular conversations that were informal. Some mentors wanted to have student contact when not otherwise involved in teaching or outside of their teaching.

### **2. *Matchmaking (was key)***

Participants commented on the appropriateness of the tailored, subjective, rather than objective, matching of mentors to mentees, particularly based on shared backgrounds. Culture was highlighted, where mentors and mentees were matched based on their nationality/country of origin. The value of tailored matching in relation to understanding hierarchy and alleviating sensitivities, especially around shyness among some cultures and/or being used to rote learning, was expressed by mentors and mentees. However, some challenges with age gaps between mentor and mentee, and mentors being 'out of touch', was highlighted. While matching based on individual situations and commonalities (e.g. family situation) was seen as positive, perceptions were contradictory for matches based on disciplinary backgrounds. Knowledge of career paths associated with specific degrees, with understanding of the discipline, subject knowledge and potential student pathways, was very relevant for some, while others appreciated having a different perspective or contact with someone from another discipline. Both mentors and mentees said that they would have liked to have known more about their match before meeting and suggested the use of more detailed questionnaires to inform matching.

### **3. *Who made the first move (was emphasised)***

There was conflicting information about who should initiate contact. Mentors were advised to expect mentees to contact them, but mentees expected mentors to be more forthcoming, especially as many were worried about approaching a 'busy person' and some were reserved due to cultural sensitivities around contacting staff. Some mentees did make first contact but others were not sure and did not explain why they did not.

### **4. *(There were a range of) Models of engagement and experiences***

Once contact was established, participants perceived and appreciated that engagement was a two-way process with mature and genuine conversations. Many valued informal interactions with no agenda and some flexibility in contrast to more formal teaching and learning practices. Mentees felt it was good balance between personal and career support. SUCCESS PLUS interactions followed

different formats, ranging from meeting on campus, face-to-face or 'going for coffee or a meal' elsewhere; from pre-planned appointments in mentor offices or having 'open door' arrangements. Communications varied in between times, ranging from using work email, to personal Skype/WhatsApp accounts or phone calls. Mentees expressed the opinion that they should be matched as soon as they arrive in Aberdeen or in the first week of teaching. Mentors were perceived by mentees as being 'busy', yet mentors felt that the time commitment was not too onerous and some would have 'given more'. Some mentors saw their role as 'part of the day job' where others were happy to be contacted and meet during evenings/weekends. While many experienced the development of strengthening relationships built up over the year, others experienced a 'petering out' over time. Mentors commented on varied experiences, including disengagement of mentees. Similarly, some mentees also reported a lack of engagement from their mentor: not making an effort; non-availability; and lack of follow-up. In spite of varied levels of engagement and experiences, SUCCESS PLUS was considered to have offered 'good mentoring' for mentees. Mentors identified that valuable aspects of participating in SUCCESS PLUS were the opportunity to and enjoyment of offering support beyond education through sharing experiences.

#### ***5. Expectations (varied and were variously met/unmet)***

Despite receiving positive feedback on the mentoring offered through SUCCESS PLUS, expectations varied among mentors and mentees. Mentors expected mentees to seek more help and advice, and some assumed that this programme was only focused on international students to help them settle into a new environment. Mentees, however, although appreciating the casual engagement and conversations, expected a bit more career-focused support. They expected to use mentors as a sounding board for future career prospects, get help with identifying their strengths/weaknesses, guidance on their courses and specific help with CV and interview preparations. For some mentees, the expectation was the other way around. While mentees expected personal support, mentors were career-focused. Relationships on the professional–personal spectrum were emphasized, with getting to know each other more personally and using the sessions to discuss personal things, being open, which might not be possible to do with a course lecturer, were highlighted. Mentors expressed some concerns about creating anxiety in students that is not warranted and not feeling equipped to deal with situations such as mental health issues among mentees. In addition, mentors and mentees also expressed concerns on maintaining confidentiality, conflict of interests, which can emerge out of playing dual roles (mentor and teachers/markers), and difficult conversations.

#### ***6. Improvements (need to be made) for Sustainability***

Specific actionable suggestions on how to improve SUCCESS PLUS were made both by mentors and mentees. From mentees, being provided with information about the programme and matching early, even before starting the programme, was suggested. Mentors felt that offering an 'attractive' training and briefing session for all mentors would be useful. Getting more mentors and alumni involved were some of the suggestions for how to grow and sustain the programme.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study addresses the gap in PGT support in higher education. PGT students have a short transition period and do not have the luxury of time needed to develop networks. Students need to address non-academic, often practical issues before they can focus on meeting their academic potential (Maslow 1943). This pilot project and evaluation showed that PGT students need support adjusting to the UK education system (if international) and those returning to study after a gap. An informal space to have conversations with mentors who have had similar career paths, and to share

experiences, is a strength of the SUCCESS PLUS programme. It also provided the opportunity to use mentors as sounding boards for professional development and future career and employability. Based on the evaluation, changes have been made to match students earlier, send information about mentees to mentors prior to first meeting and providing training to mentors. While this programme began with task-focused coaching, it developed into mentoring relationships-based support, which is positive and genuine, leading to benefits for PGT students (Yale 2017). Socio-cultural support approaches are as important as formal institutional supports, particularly for some student groups (Shadowna et al. 2019) and are more valuable than reactive approaches (Howe et al. 2012).

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