

Ensuring quality in online career mentoring

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Abstract

This article explores the issue of quality in online career mentoring. It builds on a previous evaluation of Brightside, an online mentoring system in the UK which is primarily aimed at supporting young people's transitions to further learning. The article notes that participants in Brightside's mentoring programmes reported satisfaction with their experiences, with many stating that it helped them to make decisions and to positively change their learning and career behaviours. However, the article argues that there are challenges in ensuring quality and consistency connected to both the voluntary nature of mentoring and the online mode. The article proposes a 10-point quality framework to support quality assurance, initial training and professional development for online mentors.

Keywords: mentoring, online mentoring, quality

Introduction

This article explores the issue of quality in a series of online mentoring programmes delivered using Brightside's¹ mentoring system and career information websites. Brightside is a UK-based charity which provides online mentoring to help young people access career and educational opportunities.

Mentoring is a voluntary, mutually beneficial and purposeful relationship in which an individual gives time to support another to enable them to make changes in their life (Mentoring and Befriending Foundation, 2011). Mentoring can take place for a wide variety of reasons including aspiration raising, supporting transition and navigation of the education system and the labour market (Bartlett, 2012; Rose & Jones, 2007; Thompson, 2001). The nature of the mentoring will vary depending on the model used, the purpose of the mentoring, the availability of time and resources and the mentors and mentees involved in the process.

The Brightside approach

Brightside is a charity that works to raise young people's aspirations and awareness about education and career pathways and their capability to realise those aspirations. To achieve this Brightside provides an online mentoring system and a suite of online career information and learning resources. In this online environment trained volunteer mentors connect with disadvantaged young people in order to inform them about their options, inspire them, provide a sounding board for their career thinking and propel them towards purposeful action. Some Brightside mentors and mentees only interact online, while for others the online interactions are part of a blended relationship that includes face-to-face meetings.

¹ For further information on Brightside visit the organisation's website at <http://www.thebrightsidetrust.org/>. Brightside has given permission for this article to be submitted to the *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* and has asked to be named in the published version of the article.

Brightside has its roots in the widening participation to higher education (HE) agenda, and the majority of the mentoring that takes place on the system is still focused on this area.

The Brightside approach can best be understood by viewing two examples of its mentoring. The first example comes from a mentoring relationship that has built over an academic year after the mentee met their mentor at a university summer school:

Mentor: It was really nice meeting you this week and I hope you had a really good time at the summer school and also a safe journey home. Just want to give you a quick reminder about the e-mentoring system. I will be emailing a few times a month with information regarding various aspects of the university application process and useful information for your last year at sixth form/college. However feel free to email me with any questions you may have at anytime as I am more than happy to respond and give you as much information I can. I will aim to reply as soon as possible and not leave you waiting ages for a response.

The mentee is keen to discuss the course he is interested in and to find out more about university:

Mentee: I can remember getting told at [summer school] how you can choose most of the maths modules you do, but do you get much guidance about the modules and what sort of things you learn in them?

Mentor: Basically at [University] and probably most other unis around the country, the first few weeks tend to be a period of bringing everyone up to speed. Some people will have done Further Maths as an AS or an A-level and some people like yourself won't have done it at all so this period is really just to get everyone to the same point. The real difference between A-level and uni maths which you'll touch on in first year and which will become more apparent in second year is the emphasis on proofs and looking at why ideas work.

Throughout the year, the mentor provides the mentee with a structure for the mentoring relationship. For example some UK universities require applications to be completed in October. At this time the mentor sets out the importance of the personal statement which is a key element in the application process to UK universities, provides useful resources and encourages the mentee to send him a draft of his personal statement.

When the mentee is invited to a university interview the mentor offers advice and suggestions to help the mentee to prepare. When the mentee accepts a university offer (which is at the university where his mentor is based), the mentor again provides lots of information and advice about the campus. The end of the mentoring process is clearly articulated with the mentor offering good luck for the mentee's exams:

Mentee: Thanks, I've had 4 offers so far and still to hear from one. I've got 3 maths exams, and an exam in economics and geography.

Mentor: First off congratulations on the offer from [University] that's great news! Any other places get back to you yet?

Good luck for tomorrow! Let me know how it goes and remember if you have any questions, issues or anything whatsoever relating to your results

or just in general I'm here to help so email me and I'll happily get back to you.

In this mentoring relationship the mentor regularly not only contacts the mentee, but is also responsive to the mentees needs, answering questions and providing positive reinforcement.

However, not all mentoring relationships functioned as well as this first example. In the second example the mentee enthusiastically initiates the contact with their mentor:

Mentee: Hi [Name]

Hope you are well. I just wanted to introduce myself and thank you for becoming my mentor. I know you are extremely busy and I just want to say I am grateful for you taking out some time to help me.

I am a little confused on which subject to apply to university with and which university to apply to I have some in mind but I am unsure. I am fairly certain I want a job as a corporate lawyer. ... I would also like to know a little about you. What do you do? Why did you choose to do it? What university did you study at? ... Thank you once again for becoming my mentor and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Her mentor responds a week later with some advice about choosing a university. The mentee responds to her mentor with a long email about which universities she is interested in, what grades she is expecting, what she has done to investigate her options and about trying to organise some work experience, to which the mentor replies:

Mentor: I understand your dilemma in not knowing what to study, I had similar difficulty when I was deciding what to study. Have any degree subjects captured your interest?

I can't tell you what to study but there are a couple of things you can think about. Firstly, if you're interested in a career as a corporate lawyer, you don't need to have studied a law undergraduate degree. You can do a one year course called the Graduate Diploma in Law (which is what I'm studying, it's also known as the law conversion course) after you've finished your degree. This gives you flexibility for the future – if you change your mind.

I would base your university choice on the league tables but also make sure the university is somewhere you like and can imagine spending time at. Where did you have in mind? Hopefully I can tailor my advice a bit better if I have an idea about where you're interested in going. I have friends who have gone to lots of different universities so I can ask them their opinions too!

Much of this interaction is carefully considered. The mentor is providing information, alternative ways of thinking about the mentees concerns and trying to tailor comments to the needs of the mentee. However, in this interaction the mentor also reveals some problems in keeping up with the mentoring relationship:

I'm sorry it's taken a while for me to get back to you [Name], I've got all of my exams coming up so have a lot of work on but I'll try and get back to

you at least once a week and then when my exams are over we can keep in more regular contact.

The mentee quickly replied with more detailed questions about what subjects she should take or drop and how this might be perceived at university. However, she then hears nothing from her mentor for five months. She contacts her mentor again and gets a brief response, but at this point the mentoring relationship ceases.

The mentee is clearly enthusiastic and has lots of questions which she wants to discuss. Her mentor is friendly and warm in her responses and occasionally able to demonstrate good mentoring. However, she seems to be too busy to offer sufficient help and support. Furthermore, there is neither structure to the mentoring relationship nor does the mentor attempt to manage her mentees expectations.

These two examples offer a context for a discussion on quality issues in online mentoring. The Brightside mentoring system is clearly capable of supporting a good and valuable mentoring process, but it does not guarantee it. The examples provide some insights into elements of the relationship that are important.

This article builds on a published evaluation study (Hooley, Hutchinson, & Neary, 2014) of Brightside. The focus of the current article is examining what can be learnt about quality in online mentoring from the experience of Brightside. However, it is useful to briefly outline some of the key findings of the evaluation study and to note that they echo many of the concerns raised in the discussion of the examples above.

The evaluation used a mixed methods approach which combined interviews with Brightside staff and partners (representatives of organisations that used Brightside) with analysis of existing web statistics collected by Brightside, an online survey of mentees and a detailed content analysis of a sample of online mentoring conversations. A literature review was also conducted. In summary the evaluation found that the overwhelming majority of mentees were satisfied with their experience of Brightside (91%). Mentees were able to report a range of benefits from participating in online mentoring including helping them to make decisions (56%) and changing their behaviour (49%). Mentees also reported an increased proficiency in a range of skills and knowledge during the period that they were undertaking online mentoring. In particular they felt that they understood more about their career options and were more able to actively manage their careers.

While the evaluation found that participants reported a range of benefits from engaging with Brightside the evaluation also reported a number of issues that merited further exploration. These issues included the low proportion of participants engaged in Brightside's online mentoring who sustained their mentoring relationship and a lack of clarity about what constituted a quality mentoring experience.

Many of the challenges for online mentoring are related to the definition of what a quality interaction looks like and the subsequent implementation of this vision of quality. This article builds on the evaluation to deepen understanding of quality in online mentoring and to draw out learning that can inform future online mentoring interventions.

Quality in mentoring and online mentoring

Haggard, Dougherty, Turban, and Wilbanks (2011) highlight the complexity of the field as they trace the shifting meaning of mentoring across 30 years and 40 different definitions. Discussions of mentoring make an important distinction between professional mentoring (e.g. Colley, 2001) and non-professional mentoring (e.g. Sánchez, Esparza, Berardi, & Pryce, 2011). The mentoring that was available to participants in this study was largely non-

professional, in that few had received formal training in mentoring. Mentors were either volunteers or students who were usually undertaking a paid part-time or voluntary role concurrently with HE studies. A clear distinction can be made between professional mentoring which in the context of career mentoring is the preserve of the career guidance professional and non-professional mentoring which may be undertaken on a paid or unpaid basis. This article will therefore use the term 'mentoring' to denote this kind of non-professional activity. Within this article we refer to the mentors as 'career mentors'.

Connecting young people with older and more experienced individuals in a mentoring relationship can provide an important source of career support. Such relationships are different from both professional career guidance and existing family and social networks although they may be complementary to both. Career mentors are expected to draw on their own experience, to provide signposting to further resources and to create a supportive space for an individual to undertake reflective career learning. They are not expected to be experts in the labour market or learning systems and are commonly expected to refer their mentees to professional career guidance services where they are available. Similarly a career mentor provides a different kind of career support from that offered by a family member, friend or other kind of personal contact although again they may encourage individuals to make use of such resources. In contrast to a friend or family member a career mentor of the kind provided through Brightside offers objectivity, access to a person with relevant experience (usually, but not always, current or recent university entrance) and crucially access to different and current perspectives and networks than those provided by immediate friends and family. Further discussion of the complementary relationship between mentoring and existing social networks is set out by DiRenzo, Weer, and Linnehan's (2013) longitudinal research on online mentoring.

Online mentoring

Online technologies provide an important delivery mechanism for career support which can both extend access as well as offer new types of support (Hooley, 2012; Hooley, Hutchinson, & Watts, 2010). The Internet enables diverse modes of communication such as email, videoconferencing and various social media applications. Such communication technologies have been used for online mentoring (Bierema & Merriam, 2002) in a range of different contexts including workforce development (Bierema & Hill, 2005), entrepreneurial education (Perren, 2003), career development (Headlam-Wells, Gosland, & Craig, 2006) and learning development (Thompson, Jeffries, & Topping, 2010). The literature also shows that online mentoring has been extensively used for promoting social equity and educational advancement (Single & Single, 2005).

While early online mentoring approaches were based around email exchange (Stone, 2010), increasingly online mentoring has taken place in a purpose built learning environment within which human-to-human interactions are combined with human-to computer interactions (Headlam-Wells et al., 2006). Brightside follows this approach by offering participants both access to career mentoring as well as various kinds of career information and interactive online career support. Much of the literature also emphasises the importance of considering how the online interactions interact with face-to-face interactions and how online mentoring interactions also make use of the possibility of facilitating many-to-many peer interactions (e.g. DiRenzo et al., 2013; Perren, 2003). Brightside also facilitates a range of different kinds of interaction which blend face-to face with online and one-to-one mentoring with group learning activities. However, this article particularly attends to the mode of online one-to-one mentoring relationships.

Understanding quality in mentoring and online mentoring

Mentoring, like other developmental interventions, can be done well or badly. If the concept of 'quality' is understood as a way of describing and operationalising what is known about effective mentoring practices and systems, then attempts to enhance quality need to understand what constitutes good mentoring and to develop a mechanism for measuring this and identifying when it is not present.

In this sense, 'quality' describes processes that can be observed, measured and reproduced. 'Quality' does not necessarily describe every aspect of mentoring that is important. For example a caring and empathetic mentor is undoubtedly important to the success of a mentoring relationship but cannot be described as a feature of quality in this sense. However, having a well-trained, regularly observed mentor who learns from the feedback of her or his mentees can.

There is considerable research and practice relating to quality in face-to-face mentoring practices. Literature reviews have sought to summarise what is known about effective mentoring (e.g. DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008; Hall, 2003). Such research tends to conclude that mentoring is associated with a range of positive behavioural, attitudinal, health-related, relational, motivational and career outcomes (although these impacts are often small). The research also suggests that the effectiveness of mentoring is strongly influenced by factors related to the quality of the training and support of mentors and the way the mentoring programme is organised. There has also been considerable work in defining best practice and in establishing formal and informal quality approaches that can be used in mentoring and youth mentoring settings (e.g. Jucovy, 2002; Miller, 2007; Wandersman et al., 2006). These quality approaches emphasise either the organisational aspects of mentoring programmes (training, management and evaluation) or focus on indicators of customer satisfaction.

The researchers summarised this literature drawing out key indicators of quality which could be used to examine the mentoring in Brightside. Table 1 sets out these quality indicators identifying the key pieces of literature from which they drawn.

This framework defines quality in process terms. It does not seek to define the nature or extent of the outcome that a participant will experience, but rather to describe and standardise the processes that they should go through.

It would be possible to propose a very similar set of quality identifiers for face-to-face mentoring processes. However, one important difference is the opportunity that is presented by the routine collection of online interactions as observable data. Whereas conventional mentoring is ephemeral and difficult to observe, online text-based mentoring leaves a permanent record. So while the quality identifiers might describe good practice for face-to-face mentoring they could not be used as a quality framework because the process of face-to-face mentoring is not observable or quantifiable in the way that it becomes when mentoring is conducted online.

Conventional quality approaches tend to focus on underpinning organisational factors such as training and documentation (e.g. Single & Single, 2005). With online mentoring the existence and preservation of an online record of mentoring allow quality processes to focus, in addition, on the mentoring relationship itself. This is potentially significant as the focus on the actual substance of the mentoring interaction offers the possibility of aligning quality processes closely with the experience of participants.

This focus on what happens at the heart of the interaction provides a distinctive approach to quality recognition. The term 'quality' is used in a wide variety of ways and cannot simply be

understood as a synonym for effective practice. Plant (2004) has reviewed quality standards for career support and notes that the approach to quality is a matter of perspective – what is good quality for a service commissioner (all the processes were followed) might not be recognised as such by a service user (the service user did not achieve their desired outcome). Plant highlights how different approaches to standardising quality shape practice and serve a range of masters. For example, is quality about ensuring that the individuals discussed in the case studies above get their questions answered quickly? correctly? in depth? or by a well-trained mentor? Alternatively it would be possible to determine the quality of the service by the number of individuals who chose university as their post-school option or by whether the universities making use of Brightside got their money’s worth in terms of converting mentees into student enrolments. Plant makes the point that the definition of quality is highly dependent on who decides what should be measured and how this measurement is undertaken.

Table 1. Identifiers of quality drawn from the literature.

Quality indicators	Description	Relevant literature
1. Establish an appropriate relationship with the mentee.	Initial rapport needs to be built to underpin the mentoring relationship.	Bierema and Merriam (2002); Single and Single (2005); Neary-Booth, Morgan, Hambly, Christouopoulos and Dyke (2008); DiRenzo et al. (2013); Shpigelman and Gill (2013).
2. Establish the purpose of the mentoring conversation.	The mentor and mentee need to achieve a shared understanding of the purpose of the mentoring and its format e.g. the frequency of contact.	Bierema and Merriam (2002); Single and Single (2005); Headlam-Wells et al. (2006); Neary-Booth et al. (2008); Thompson et al. (2010).
3. Provide the mentee with information and/or links to useful resources.	The mentor has an awareness of the information and resources available and provides this information in a way that is relevant to the needs of the mentee.	Headlam-Wells et al. (2006); Neary-Booth et al. (2008); Thompson et al. (2010).
4. Refer the mentee to appropriate services.	The mentor is aware of the limits of their own knowledge and able to refer to appropriate services where necessary.	Neary-Booth et al. (2008).
5. Provide prompt and relevant responses.	Successful mentoring is dependent on the continuity and flow of the mentoring conversation.	Bierema and Merriam (2002); Neary-Booth et al. (2008); DiRenzo et al. (2013); Shpigelman and Gill (2013).
6. Encourage the mentee to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses.	The mentor structures interactions in ways that encourage reflection.	Headlam-Wells et al. (2006); Thompson et al. (2010).
7. Encourage the mentee to explore their career goals.	The mentor connects discussions about immediate decisions or issues to the mentees longer term career goals.	Headlam-Wells et al. (2006); Neary-Booth et al. (2008).
8. Identify opportunities and	The mentor should help the mentee to understand some of	Neary-Booth et al. (2008); Thompson et al. (2010).

explore ways to overcome barriers.	the barriers that are preventing them from achieving their goals. They should help the mentee to generate solutions and make plans to move forwards.	
9. Move the mentee progressively towards their goals.	The mentor provides a structure through which the mentoring relationship proceeds which is designed to facilitate progression and development.	Headlam-Wells et al. (2006); Single and Single (2005); Thompson et al. (2010).
10. Bring the process to a mutually satisfactory close.	Mentoring relationships need to come to an end at some point. This offers an opportunity to summarise learning and progress and to offer closure to both parties.	Bierema and Merriam (2002); Neary-Booth et al. (2008); Shpigelman and Gill (2013); Thompson et al. (2010).

There has been little written about developing quality in online mentoring. While some work has evaluated online mentoring programmes (Hunt, Powell, Little, & Mike, 2013; Quintana & Zambrano, 2014), very little has attempted to systematise this into frameworks that can support on going quality enhancements. Some researchers have begun to explore elements of online mentoring from a quality perspective, for example useful work by Shpigelman and Gill (2013) has found that successful online mentoring relationships have a different, less formal tone, from those that are unsuccessful. Meanwhile Simmonds and Lupi (2010) have developed an effective online mentoring process which focuses on the matching of mentee needs with mentor capability and experience. However, quality in online mentoring remains a new area with few models to draw on.

Methodology

The evidence used within this article has been derived from the evaluation of the effectiveness of Brightside.

This article draws mainly on detailed content analysis of a representative sample of online mentoring conversations (n = 366) although some limited use is made of qualitative data from an accompanying online survey of mentees (n = 555). The full methodology for the survey is set out in Hooley et al. (2014) and is not included here as only a few illustrative quotations are drawn from this data-set.

Because of the sampling approaches used it was not possible to match individual respondent data gathered from the survey with data from the content analysis of online mentoring conversations. The data used relates to interactions that took place in 2011–2012. Both the survey and the content analysis were undertaken with mentees who had sent at least two messages as part of their online mentoring experience and were therefore judged to have engaged in a mentoring experience rather than to have simply set up an account.

The content analysis allowed researchers to explore in detail the nature of the discussions taking place in the mentoring conversations. The availability of online text-based mentoring conversations meant that it was possible to review complete sets of interactions between mentors and mentees. A representative sample was drawn from the database of mentees to ensure that the analysis of conversations reflected all mentees' experiences. The base population for this sample was a cleaned database of 3450 mentees.

The sampling frame is summarised in Table 2. The data-set was organised by user identification number order. Names were then drawn from the list at intervals of 10 to correspond with the sample frame below. The framework below identifies 345 names although the eventual total number of conversations analysed was 366 as additional names were drawn by the team to compensate for some records which had missing conversations or where individuals were difficult to identify. All data were anonymised and all participants in the programme were sent a copy of the evaluation report before publication to provide an opportunity to object to any data that they felt should not be published. No participants made any such objections.

Researchers reviewed each of the conversations and coded them in relation to each of the quality identifiers which had been developed through the literature review. Where a mentoring conversation provided evidence for the quality identifier it was coded as either 'yes' (the quality identifier was clearly present in this conversation) or 'partially yes' (some elements of the quality identifier were in evidence, but there was room for improvement). If the quality identifier was not present it was coded as 'no' (the quality identifier was not evident). In some cases the conversations provided evidence that a particular aspect of the mentoring relationship had happened face-to-face, and in this case it was coded as 'probably done face-to-face'. This proved to be an important category as a substantial proportion of the online mentoring was clearly accompanied by some face-to-face meetings. The final category concerned examples of conversations in which interactions were happening which were not strictly e-mentoring. For example some projects were using the e-mentoring platform to facilitate peer communications that were not clearly mentoring relationships. Where this was the case the conversation was coded as 'no but wouldn't be appropriate'. The final two categories ('probably done face-to-face' and 'no but wouldn't be appropriate') have been excluded from the analysis of quality found in this article.

Table 2: Sampling quota

Quota sample: females

		Ages (years)					
		12-15	16-17	18-19	20-25	unknown	Total
No. of messages	2-5	9	36	26	2	39	111
	6-10	5	19	17	1	17	58
	11-15	1	10	9	0	8	28
	16-20	1	6	5	0	3	14
	Total	16	69	57	4	65	211

Quota sample: males

		Ages (years)					
		12-15	16-17	18-19	20-25	unknown	Total
No. of messages	2-5	8	21	18	1	33	80
	6-10	3	10	8	1	13	35
	11-15	1	5	4	0	4	14

16-20	0	2	1	0	2	6
Total	12	37	32	3	51	134

The judgements about quality were made by a team of three senior researchers (the authors of this article) and seven research assistants. The process began with the senior researchers coding the same pilot conversations and then examining the differences in coding approach. Through an iterative process of coding and discussion a clear set of agreements emerged. These were then codified into a training session for the research assistants. Research assistants were then invited to code an initial conversation and then to discuss their coding approach with one of the senior researchers. Following this the senior researchers continued to support the researchers in difficult coding decisions and to perform regular spot checks on their coding.

In addition to the exploration of mentoring quality the analysis of the online mentoring conversation also explored the range of topics covered in the interactions. To explore this, a selection of messages were sampled and used to inform a typology of areas that might be addressed during mentoring conversations. This framework was then used by researchers as the coding framework for the analysis of mentoring conversations.

Content of the online mentoring conversations

Online mentoring offers researchers a fantastic opportunity to ‘pull back the curtain’ and see what actually takes place within mentoring conversations. Whereas in conventional mentoring relationships conversations are hidden, and any attempt to recover them is subject to either relying on research participant’s recall or researchers recording or directly observing the interactions which may impact on the nature of the discussions. Online mentoring provides a source of naturally occurring data which can be accessed in full. Such data are invaluable because they both provides a context for any discussion of the quality of interactions and allows judgements to be made about whether conversations are covering the expected or relevant ground.

Table 3 summarises the topics covered across the 366 conversations analysed. Many conversations covered more than one topic.

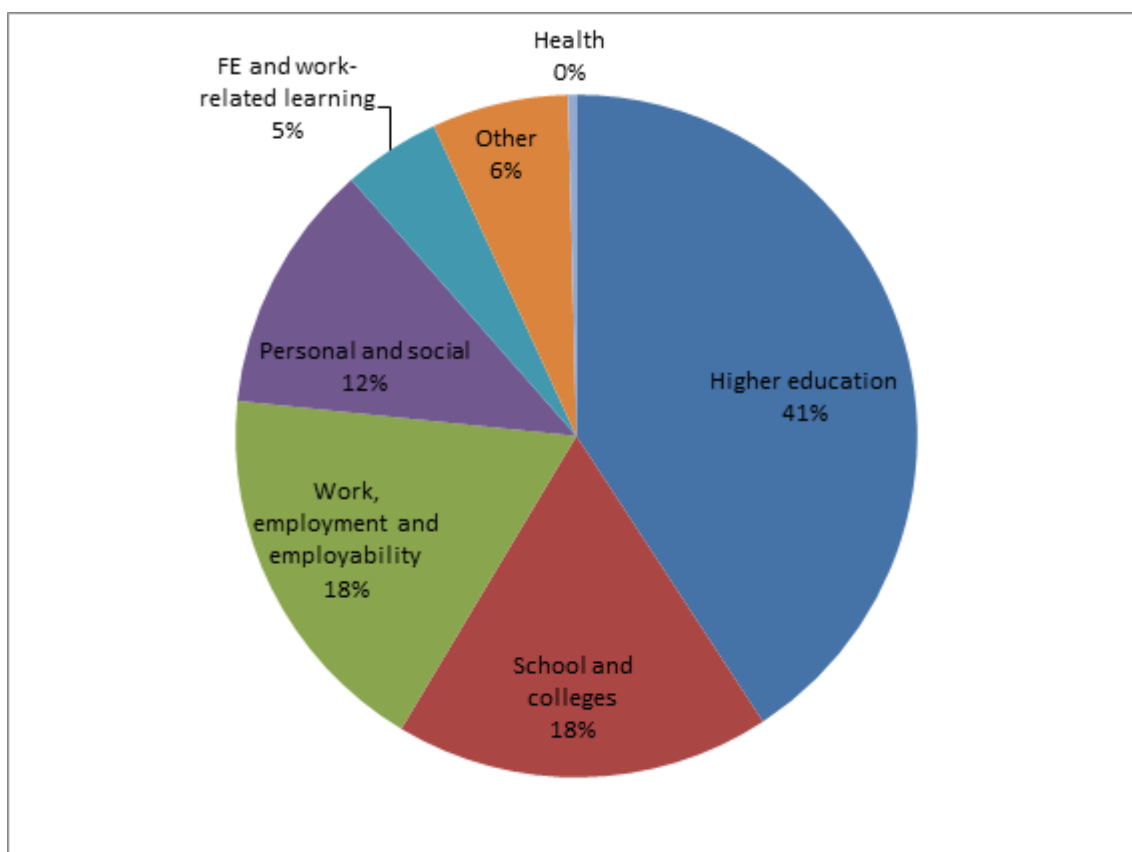
Table 3: Topics covered in mentoring conversations

Topic	Total	Topic	Total
Choosing a university course	180	Caring responsibilities	19
Choosing a university	164	Whether to go to college	15
Subject choice	112	Changing course	15
Work experience while at school	82	Hobbies and interests	13
Entry requirements for courses	74	Assessment centres	10
Whether to apply to university	58	Student finance	10

Module choice	47	Work experience at university	9
Placements while at university	46	Relationships with family	8
Moving away from home	40	Choosing a college	8
Personal statement	40	Student life	8
Interview skills	36	Grades	7
Choosing a college course	36	Freshers' week	6
Finding student accommodation	33	Changing course	5
Revision/Exam preparation	32	Gap year	4
Project	30	Dealing with existing health issues	3
Uncategorised	29	Volunteering	3
Job search and CV	25	Interviews and open days	3
Logistics/Arrangements	24	Subject support	3
Making new friends	21	Dealing with new health issues	2
Career choice	20		

The researchers aggregated these topics into broader categories. Figure 1 shows the predominance of discussions within these categories.

Figure 1: Areas covered in mentoring conversation by category.



As Figure 1 demonstrates these mentoring conversations are generally highly focused around the core process of supporting career exploration and transitions. The following quote illustrates this:

Hi K__, your course sounds quite interesting and it seems like a big change from college life. How do they help students to deal with the transition? I have applied for Chemistry with a possibility of a year in either industry or abroad at Sussex, Loughborough, Southampton, York and Liverpool. (Mentee, analysis of online conversation)

The focus on transition to HE is often underpinned by mentoring that supports the mentee's current engagement in their subject and in their school work:

Thanks C__ that's helped a lot. I understand the difference between thermodynamic stability and kinetic stability now ... :D. (Mentee, analysis of online conversation)

The detailed analysis of naturally occurring data therefore revealed that the mentoring conversations were generally purposeful. Mentees sought information and advice about educational and career transitions and mentors sought to provide such information.

Some mentoring relationships addressed issues of personal and social relationships and anxieties about transitions. However, these conversations represented a very small fraction of the mentoring discussions for example only 21 conversations included discussion about making new friends at university in comparison with the 180 conversations that addressed choosing a university course. It may be that there is no mentee interest in discussing these things in the context of a mentoring relationship or that mentors or the format of the online

mentoring relationship constrain such discussions either knowingly or unknowingly. It would be interesting to explore the issue of what is not talked about and why in more depth in future research.

Dimensions of quality in online mentoring

Initial reviews of the mentoring conversations revealed that there was a wealth of good mentoring practice in evidence. The following quotes provide a series of examples of mentoring interactions that typify the quality identifiers.

Establish the purpose of the conversation:

I hope to be able to be an effective mentor for you while you apply to university, offering advice and someone to talk to when, where and if you need it. Hopefully you will find the process helpful, and benefit from it as much (or more) than I hope I will. More details about the e-mentoring will be (or will have been) discussed at the e-mentoring introductory session. (Mentor)

Prompt and relevant responses:

Now for some more mentoring-specific stuff. The first thing that would be great to do is to establish a weekly contact schedule so we know when to write to each other etc. Can I suggest that I'll write to you by Tuesday evening and you by Friday? Also, I will try and answer the questions you have, and will ask you questions about things so we can get the most out of this. (Mentor)

Move the mentee progressively towards their career goals:

Thank you for the article about moving up to A level. It was really good to know that perhaps it isn't too scary moving up to A level! I also hadn't really thought about how I'd use my free time. It hadn't really occurred to me I'd need to sort out whether I was doing an enrichment activity one free period or studying English in another. (Mentee)

Bring the process to a mutually satisfactory close:

As you may or may not know the programme will be ending shortly which means you've only got me to use for a limited period of time. But don't worry; you are an extremely confident, intelligent and capable individual. I'm sure you will have great success in whatever path you head down. (Mentor)

These examples illustrate the opportunity that is offered by having access to full transcripts of mentoring relationships. For those involved in the management and quality assurance of mentoring as well as for those with concerns about safeguarding, it offers a different level of insight than is possible with face-to-face mentoring. However, such insights are not without challenges or ethical problems. In the context of this project all data were anonymised and analysed in a composite way. If this kind of data were to be used to performance manage individuals, then issues around surveillance and privacy within mentoring relationships would need to be addressed. There is need for further debate and discussion around these issues and for recognition that online mentoring frames these ethical questions differently to face-to-face mentoring.

There were many more examples of the 10 identifiers of a quality mentoring process, as well as examples where these were missing or where opportunities to develop the mentee were missed or mishandled. Evidence from the evaluation survey suggests that where the quality identifiers were not in evidence mentees were often aware of its limitations and felt that it adversely impacted on their experience. For example, where the purpose of the mentoring conversation was not set out clearly some mentees were unsure about what to talk to their mentor about:

I just didn't understand what I was doing there half the time. (Mentee, survey response)

Perhaps most clearly the regularity (or irregularity) of communication was seen as an issue by mentees. Some participants in the survey complained that the poor responsiveness from mentors had created problems for their engagement with the programmes, either because questions were not answered or because communication was too infrequent:

If the mentor was more easily available to respond. I understand that they may have other important things to do however it may have been useful to set a day when the mentor would have to log on, say once a week. (Mentee, survey response)

The analysis of the content of interactions between mentors and mentees demonstrated that there were high levels of occurrence of the 10 identifiers of a good quality engagement. Table 4 ranks the quality identifiers by the likelihood of them being present.

Table 4 suggests that a generally high quality of mentoring is being delivered using Brightside mentoring. On average quality identifiers were observable 84% of the time (either through a yes or partially yes response) and were only clearly absent 16% of the time. Given that the quality identifiers have been developed retrospectively and have not currently informed the training or management of mentors this suggests that the blend of training, support and mentor selection employed by most of Brightside's partners is working effectively to deliver consistent and good quality mentoring.

Table 4: Quality identifiers present in mentoring conversations.

Quality identifier	Total relevant	Present (%)	Partially present (%)	Not present (%)
Establish an appropriate relationship	281	85	11	4
Establish the purpose of the conversation	295	82	13	4
Provide information or links to resources	287	67	14	20
Encourage the mentee to explore their career goals	272	66	19	15
Prompt and relevant responses	348	63	28	9

Identify opportunities or explore ways to overcome barriers	256	63	18	20
Refer to appropriate services	237	62	11	27
Move the mentee progressively towards their goals	288	60	22	18
Encourage the mentee to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses	272	60	23	17
Bring the process to a mutually satisfactory close	241	41	24	34
Average (mean)		65	19	16

These findings show that there was a considerable diversity in relation to the level of engagement with each of the quality identifiers. The weakest areas relate to the successful closure of the mentoring relationship and also to quality identifiers which require an understanding of the broader support context that mentees can access (providing information, identifying opportunity and referral). This latter indicator may require knowledge of sources of specialist support and information which may be outside of the mentors existing knowledge base.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the findings of an evaluation of an online career mentoring programme in relation to quality. It has argued that there is a considerable body of research evidence that demonstrates the value of online mentoring in general and a growing amount that suggests a strong career support role for online mentoring. However, relatively little of such work has much to say about how to ensure a quality experience in online career mentoring.

Given this gap in the literature this article has drawn on the empirical work conducted around the Brightside evaluation to argue that attention to quality is an important element of both evaluation and implementation of online career mentoring programmes. Online career mentoring offers a unique opportunity to explore the substance of career mentoring conversations for research on quality assurance.

The evaluation research proposed a 10-point framework against which the quality of the online mentoring programme was assessed. This framework was used as a key component

of the evaluation of Brightside and proved to be revealing in terms of both the strengths and weaknesses of the mentoring taking place.

The 10-point framework therefore provides a tool to both describe and develop quality in online career mentoring. As such it could be used to underpin the training of mentors, to help in the management and assessment of mentors, evaluation of the mentoring experience and standardisation of these approaches.

While this framework has been developed specifically in the context of Brightside, it has potential to inform a wider range of online mentoring approaches. At its core is the recognition that the production of full transcripts of mentoring relationships enables a different kind of quality assurance in online mentoring than is possible in relation to conventional mentoring. Such a recognition raises a number of issues that have implications for the management and practice ethics of online mentoring relationships. These will need to be debated further and handled sensitively. However, it is hoped that the framework set out in this article, or iterations based on it, can provide a foundation for approaches that seek to support ongoing quality improvement of online career mentoring.

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