University–school mentoring to support transition into and out of higher education

Alana I. James

Summary

- Mentoring between psychology undergraduate students and A-level psychology pupils, from widening participation (WP) backgrounds, was run as action research over four academic years.
- The key aims were to support potential new university students' transition into higher education (HE) and current students' transition out of HE into work or further study.
- Benefits included significant increases in mentors' employability skills and career-related goal achievement, reported gains for mentees in insight into going to university, knowledge of psychology, and academic skills, and links between the university and local schools.
- Challenges included difficulties in scheduling, the time demands involved, keeping the opportunity accessible, and working effectively with student mentors and RAs.
- University-school mentoring can effectively support undergraduates' employability whilst benefitting potential new students, but having more than one coordinator is recommended.

Reasons for introducing this teaching method

Aims: To use mentoring between psychology university students and A-level pupils to support:

i. New students' transition into HE through promoting aspirations to university-level study and developing realistic expectations about university study and life.
ii. Current students' transition out of HE through an opportunity to gain real-world experience and to make connections between what they learnt and applied practice.

Personal motivation: As a PhD student I worked as an Aimhigher associate, promoting school pupils' aspirations to HE, and my thesis investigated peer support systems in schools. I saw first-hand how valuable mentoring support can be, and that being a mentor leads to personal development. I wanted to use my experience to support both my university students and pupils in local schools.

Literature: Mentoring has been used to support university transition, including for pupils from WP backgrounds (e.g. Chester et al., 2013; Passy & Morris, 2010). Withdrawal from university, or withdrawal-consideration, can arise due to a mis-match between expectations of HE and the reality (Briggs et al., 2012); mentoring from students is well-placed to promote realistic expectations. This is especially important within psychology. A review of undergraduate education (Trapp et al., 2011) recommended that psychology entry students should be informed about what is involved, and common misconceptions held by new students have been identified, for example, not conceptualising it as a science (Reddy & Lantz, 2010).

Mentoring is a valuable type of placement for psychology students (Trapp et al., 2011). Psychology students need to be supported to gain employability experience; entry into psychology and other professional training routes requires a substantial amount of hands-on experience. Supporting younger pupils is beneficial for skills and career development (e.g. Fleming & Grace, 2016; James et al., 2014), and is an opportunity to gain experience working with young people and to make connections between applied practice and what they learn about developmental and educational psychology.

Description: I set up the mentoring scheme at Royal Holloway, University of London (RHUL) in 2013–14 with a Higher Education Academy (HEA) Individual Teaching Development Grant. I ran it as an unfunded action research project for a further three years, until I moved to the University of Reading (UoR) in 2017. Figure 1 gives an example of the potential sequence and content of sessions, and key aspects of project delivery are shown in Table 1.

Benefits

Full findings have been reported for the first year so far (James, 2014), but overall similar benefits for mentors and mentees were seen

Figure 1: Example of mentoring content.

Example Mentoring Sessions

Mentor presentation on psychology at degree level
1 – Introductions and goal-setting
2 – Studying a psychology degree
3 – Skills development using an A-level topic
4 – Open for topic to be agreed with mentees
5 – Goal-reviewing and presentation planning
6 – Mentee presentations reflecting on experience

Table 1: Key aspects of university-school mentoring delivery.

Psychology university-school mentoring
Mentor selection: 33 psychology second- and third-year undergraduates acted as mentors. Mentors needed to show an ability to communicate and reflect upon their own transition experience in a written application, but no other experience was required. Mentors could choose for it to be a course-linked placement or a university extra-curricular 'Passport' award placement.
Mentee selection: Three local schools participated, usually two per year, with approximately 70 pupils receiving mentoring. Mentees were selected by their A-level psychology teacher upon the basis of meeting at least one of the university's WP criteria (e.g. limited experience of HE in their family). Pupils and parents were given project information and could choose whether to opt-in.
Mentor training: A half day covering mentoring skills, active listening skills – with support from a university counsellor, and safeguarding – drawing upon materials from the university external relations team. Group activities were used to support bonding amongst mentors.
Mentoring activities: Mentoring sessions were held at the schools. Mentors worked in groups of 4–5 per school, running a mix of whole group activities with 8–10 mentees and smaller pair-led activities. Depending upon the school's schedule there were around six one-hour mentoring sessions across the Spring term. The first activity was a mentor presentation about studying psychology at university which schools could open to all psychology pupils, so that the project had value for pupils beyond mentees. I provided a presentation brief, session ideas, and supervision, but mentors developed content and activities.
Evaluation and ethical practice: Mixed-methods, pre-post evaluation each year fed in to practice changes. See James (2014, 2018) for methods descriptions. I followed BPS and British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines. Mentors and mentees were invited to participate in the evaluation, but it was made clear that this was optional and their decision would not affect their education or mentoring involvement. Six students acted as paid or placement RAs – RAs led the evaluations activities to encourage mentors and mentees to give honest answers.

Figure 2: Summary of the benefits for mentees, mentors, and the university.

University-school mentoring impact	
Mentees: In the first year mentees did not improve relative to controls on attitudes towards HE, self-efficacy or self-esteem, but mentee benefits reported by mentees and mentors included enhanced insight into going to university, greater knowledge of psychology, and gains in academic skills. Each year the majority of mentees reported high satisfaction with the experience and agreed that it developed their skills and knowledge, but this varied if attendance at mentoring was inconsistent.	Mentors: In the first year significant increases were seen in two of nine areas of psychological literacy and in self-efficacy, but not self-esteem. Preliminary data analysis from two project years where mentors (20 mentors; 95 per cent female) completed the same evaluation measures found pre- to post-test significant increases in overall self-efficacy, $t(17)=2.36$, $p=0.031$, and overall employability, $t(17)=2.67$, $p=0.016$. Mentors were asked to identify goals related to the placement – self-rated goal achievement significantly increased by the end, $t(51)=18.39$, $p<0.001$. Content analysis found that the main goal categories were gaining experience with young people (24 per cent), communication skills development (22 per cent), and to enhance career development (17 per cent).
University: Mentoring became a core part of psychology outreach activities, which I co-ordinated whilst at RHUL, and the links fostered led to the schools becoming involved in other activities.	

each year. I have been analysing the data from across the project, including working with a psychology student RA through a UoR placement scheme. Details of the measures can be seen in James (2018), and a summary of benefits is shown in Figure 2.

Issues

Scheduling: Findings showed that consistent attendance is important for mentees to benefit, but finding regular times which fit with everyone's timetables was consistently very challenging.

Keeping it accessible: Mentors' travel costs were covered by the grant then a university fund, but had to be kept low. Mentoring was open to pupils who would miss sessions due to part-time work.

Time demands: Running the project was time demanding. I integrated it within my outreach co-ordinator role, but still lacked time to write up findings for publication after the first year.

Supervising mentors: I knew from previous research (James et al., 2014) that mentoring promotes development partly through experience of challenges – so I had to be hands-off. I introduced a 'Session Planning and Debriefing Sheet' – mentors recorded objectives and activities, reflections upon how it went, and questions for me. This gave me oversight, and promoted reflective practice.

Students as research partners: I took a partnership approach, involving RAs each year in reviewing how the project had gone previously and coming up with ideas for developments. It is important to remember though that student RAs need training and supervision, which requires time.

Student's perspective

Preliminary content analysis of qualitative data across years shows that students perceived benefits including academic development, insight into career options, confidence, and interpersonal skills. Across years mentors were highly satisfied with the experience, with 90–100 per cent typically agreeing with statements that it developed their presentation skills, confidence, and understanding of psychology.

Mentors benefited beyond the initial experience. Some became outreach student helpers, and others completed further work or research experience in the school. Many took my educational psychology option module, where I saw them apply their mentoring experiences in class

activities linking educational theory and practice. Recent reflections from students are shown below:

> *The mentoring sessions involved one-to-one and group engagement, and I was able to gain experience with explaining concepts in different ways to aid student understanding. This has helped me in the teaching element of my PhD, and I have felt confident in front of my classes* (Louisa Thomas, Mentor 2014–2015, Psychology PhD Student).

> *My job as a student mentor further developed my presentation skills, public speaking skills, planning and organisation skills as well as attention to detail. These were important skills required for me to achieve my master in MSc Business and Organisational psychology and my current job* (Jue Joo Jong, Mentor 2015–2016 and 2016–2017, Construction Project Management Assistant).

> *Working on the mentoring project was a very enriching opportunity and really sparked my interest in research, so was in many ways the first step in my research career* (Michaela Rea, Research Assistant 2014-2015, Psychology Research Assistant and Associate Lecturer).

Reflections

As a teaching-focused academic this project enabled me to use my knowledge of peer mentoring to enhance the student experience whilst maintaining a research profile - despite limited scholarship time. It was disappointing that the project was suspended when I left RHUL; I am considering re-developing it at UoR, but having a second coordinator to make it more manageable and sustainable.

My background in educational psychology means that my research expertise fits well with my practice; the university-school mentoring project fit well into my outreach coordinator role and complemented my teaching. My experience of this project in turn influenced me to develop research into specialist mentoring to support transition for students with disabilities (Lucas & James, 2018).

It concerns me that early career teaching-intensive academics with other backgrounds may find it harder both to maintain their research and capitalise upon their research within their teaching practice; indeed all three finalists in the inaugural year of this Award have educational psychology backgrounds. Supporting teaching-focused academics from other areas in psychology is something I will pay attention to as a mentor for staff and PhD students.

Dissemination and publication

For initial findings see James (2014); further findings are being prepared for publication. The project is also in an HEA action research guide (James, 2018), and HEA and UoR blogs (James, 2015; 2017).

I have shared the practice with school, university, and other practitioner audiences, including as an invited speaker at a 2015 HEA Student Transitions Conference Workshop, an opening speaker at a 2017 RHUL Teachers and Careers Advisors Conference, and a workshop convenor on 'Supporting Educational Transitions' at a 2017 RHUL/South East Research Network for Schools Practitioner Event. I disseminated it within my university at a Teaching and Learning Symposium and in a video resource.

The project has been presented at teaching-focused and developmental psychology conferences, including the BPS Psychology of Education Conference (UK), Society for Research in Child Development Biennial Meeting (US), and European Conference on Developmental Psychology (Greece).

Author

Dr Alana I. James, University of Reading Email: a.i.james@reading.ac.uk

References

Briggs, A.R.J., Clark, J. & Hall, I. (2012). Building bridges: Understanding student transition to university. *Quality in Higher Education,* iFirst article, 1–19. doi: 10.1080/13538322.2011.614468.

Chester, A., Burton, L.J., Xenos, S. & Elgar, K. (2013). Peer mentoring: Supporting successful transition for first-year psychology undergraduate students. *Australian Journal of Psychology, 65*, 30–37. doi: 10.1111/ajpy.12006.

Fleming, M.J. & Grace, D.M. (2016), Agents of aspiration: The (often unintended) benefits to university students working in outreach programmes. *Educational Research, 58*(3), 300–318. doi: 10.1080/00131881.2016.1185316.

James, A.I. (2018). University-school mentoring: Supporting students' employability and pupils' transition into higher education. In: L. Arnold & L. Norton, (Eds.), *HEA Action Research: Sector Case Studies.* (pp.31–37). York: Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from: www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/hea-action-research-sector-case-studies

James, A.I. (November 2017). Reflections on university transition from a new staff member. *Engage in Teaching and Learning Blog,* University of Reading. http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/engage-in-teaching-and-learning/2017/11/06/reflections-on-university-transition-from-a-new-staff-member-by-dr-alana-james/

James, A.I. (May 2015). Using mentoring to support transition into and out of higher education. *Higher Education Academy Blog.* Retrieved from: www.heacademy.ac.uk/using-mentoring-support-transition-and-out-higher-education

James, A.I. (2014). Cross-age mentoring to support A-level pupils' transition into higher education and undergraduate students' employability. *Psychology Teaching Review, 20*(2), 79–94. ISSN 0965-948X (Special issue: Pedagogical action research).

James, A.I., Smith, P.K. & Radford, L. (2014). Becoming grown-ups: A qualitative study of the experiences of peer mentors. *Pastoral Care in Education, 32*(2),104–115. ISSN 1468-0122 doi: 10.1080/02643944.2014.893008.

Lucas, R. & James, A.I. (2018). An evaluation of specialist mentoring for university students with autism spectrum disorders and mental health conditions. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 48*(3), 694-707. ISSN 1573-3432 doi: 10.1007/s10803-017-3303-1.

Passy, R. & Morris, M. 2010. *Evaluation of aimhigher: Learner attainment and progression.* Final report. National Foundation for Educational Research. Retrieved from: www.hefce.ac.uk/data/year/2010/Evaluation,of,Aimhigher,learner,attainment,and,progression/

Reddy, P. & Lantz, C. (2010). Myths, maths and madness: Misconceptions around psychology, In D. Upton & A. Trapp (Eds.) *Teaching Psychology in Higher Education* (pp.54–81). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Trapp, A., Banister, P., Ellis, J. et al. (2011). *The future of undergraduate psychology in the United Kingdom.* York: The higher education academy psychology network. Retrieved from: www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/future-undergraduate-psychologyunited-kingdom