Mentorship as a Disruptive Tool for Cultivating 21st Century Leaders

*Laura McDermott, Director of Academic Experience and Innovation at **IE Business School**, Adjunct Professor of Innovation and Design at **IE University**, and **Alexandra Zografou**, Manager of the MVDM Mentor Program at IE, explore the untapped potential of mentorship.*

In a world that is ever-changing and continuously confronted by global challenges, mentorship can be a powerful tool to facilitate knowledge exchange, collaboration, and disruptive thinking. In this article, we explore the concept of mentorship from its emergence in ancient Greek times, to a powerful concept of the 21st century that, if designed and implemented in a conscious way, can bring an abundance of benefits not only to the individuals involved, but also to a wider social system.

Looking to the Past to Understand the Present

If someone attempted a historical journey to understand the evolution of the definition of "mentoring", they would find its origins traced back to Homer's Odyssey. As the story goes, the namesake protagonist, Odysseus, entrusts Mentor, a close friend senior in age, with his son's care during his absence in the Trojan war.

The nature of this relationship based on advice, wisdom transfer, guidance, and trust has led the word "mentor" to be adopted in many languages as a term meaning someone who imparts wisdom to – and shares knowledge with – a younger, typically less-experienced person. Since the first mentorship example was recorded, informal mentoring relationships and programs would take place between mentors and protégés throughout history – to name a few: Sir Thomas More and Thomas Linacre[1]; T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound; Martin Luther King and Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays; both Beethoven and Mozart and Haydn[2]; and most recently Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg[3].

Mentorship for Professionals in the 20th Century

Despite the emergence of the mentor figure in ancient Greek times, it was not until the late 20th century that scientific research of mentoring began. The mid-70s appear to be the turning point, when mentoring for a professional career came to the spotlight as a topic for investigation[4]. Its popularity may be associated with the

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[1] Jadwick, K. D.: The Perceptions of Effectiveness of Mentoring Relationships in Higher Education [Doctoral dissertation, Florida Atlantic University], ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, p. 24 (1997)

[2] Ferreres, A.: Brief History of Mentorship, in Surgical Mentorship and Leadership - Building for Success in Academic Surgery, p. 5, Springer, Cham, (2018)

[3] Smith, L.: Chapter 2: What can mentoring do? [Online Course], Exploring career mentoring and coaching, The Open University, (2018)

[4] Anderson, E., Shannon, A.: Toward a conceptualization of mentoring, Journal of Teacher Education, 39, p. 39 (1988)

rise of the Human Resources Development Movement in business. The rise of formal mentoring initiatives in business was triggered by the five following trends: quest for innovation, merger explosion, changing composition of the workforce, coming labor shortage, and emergence of cross-cultural corporations.[5]

Mentorship in Companies

In research developed at IE Foundation, by IE's Observatory for Demography, the authors identified that mentorship presents a key opportunity for intergenerational collaboration in companies. Research on European companies shows that there begins to be a higher prevalence of formalised programs for intergenerational knowledge sharing, mostly taking the form of mentorship (from senior to junior, from junior to senior or bi-directional).

> *If designed well, a mentorship program within a company could create a strong competitive advantage since wisdom can be exchanged in a collaborative fashion. Workers at all levels of an organization can benefit from having the insight of other generations and the skills and experience developed in diverse generational environments. From an organisational perspective, matching profiles together – profiles which may not normally interact – could provide an opportunity to maintain key knowledge and wisdom within a company. This could reduce the risk of losing key learnings when senior profiles begin to retire, while also helping junior profiles get a broader perspective or strategic view of the company.*

Mentorship in the 21st Century Higher Education

Mentoring today might be considered a practice which aims to cultivate "novel educational skills and practices for the 21st century"[6], leveraging technology and the power of networks, helping students become familiar with a new environment and, ultimately, providing them with frameworks and abilities to help them navigate a complex professional and academic landscape.

In order to better understand the status of mentorship in Higher Education as a subject of global academic inquiry, we researched databases of academic journals, using a very specific set of keywords: "university mentoring program". We analyzed 41 active university mentor program to find out whether they have developed any case studies discussing the initiatives they designed. The research showed that almost all of the landing pages dedicated to the mentorship initiatives did not mention any success indicators or activities designed, rather presented an overview of these programs. However, it is clear that all mentoring initiatives studied fall into one – or more – of the categories mentioned below.

3.2 Categories Of Mentorship Initiatives Found In Higher Education:

1. *Peer mentoring program*, in which experienced students welcome new students into the campus in order to boost their feeling of belonging[7]. In some cases, faculty mentors

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[5] Jadwick, K. D.: The Perceptions of Effectiveness of Mentoring Relationships in Higher Education [Doctoral dissertation, Florida Atlantic University], ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, p. 25 (1997)

[6] Speculative and Critical Design: approaches and influences in education: http://ixdea.uniroma2.it/inevent/events/idea2010/index.php?s=102&link=call50

[7] Brown University, Columbia University, Purdue University, the Technical University of Denmark, the University of Chicago, the University of Edinburgh, the University of Lund, the University of Sheffield, the University of St. Andrews, the University of Sydney and the University of Sydney Business School, the University of Toronto, the University of Washington, University of St. Francis

(Princeton, University of Washington) and staff mentors (University of Washington) assumed this role.

2. *Alumni mentoring program*, designed to facilitate career-based mentoring relationships between alumni and current students[8].

3. *Mentoring programs targeted to a specific category of mentees:* staff[9], research staff[10], entrepreneurs[11], minorities[12] and people of color[13], women[14], faculty[15], alumni[16], exchange students[17], and male students only[18].

Almost all programs name the benefits for each party involved, though some go further and include resources and/or toolkits[19] for the aspiring mentors, and provide a training timeline[20]. This might suggest the beginning of an encouraging, structured approach towards mentorship within an academic setting.

Designing the IE Business School Mentor Program (formerly HST Mentor), Launched in 2018

The IE HST Mentor Program was designed in late 2018 with the idea of connecting incoming students with previous generations, giving the latter the opportunity to contribute to the first's learning experience, and overall strengthening the sense of community among them.

The first Master's degree in which the Mentor Program was implemented was the Master in Customer Experience and Innovation (MCXI). From 2018 to 2019, the core academic design team started testing the concept through a ten-month pilot program with a few alumni who graduated from the program in July 2018. These mentors connected on a monthly basis with groups of students and got feedback on their learning experience. This pilot engaged Madrid-based alumni to effectively collect quantitative and qualitative feedback from existing students on a consistent basis. Students felt supported and listened to during their MCXI journey. Alumni developed their portfolio and were actively engaged in the IE community after graduating.

During the "pilot" mode of the first Master in 2018-19, there were six internal stakeholders actively participating in the project (not including the student mentees). Just two years later, at the end of the 2020-2021 academic year, HST Mentor Program counted on 50+ internal stakeholders actively participating in the project, from academic and marketing teams to mentor faculties and program coordinators.

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[8] Columbia University, ITMO University, King's College of London, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, the American University of Paris, the University of Amsterdam, the University of Auckland, the University of Melbourne, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Sydney Business School, the University of Washington, the University of Zurich, Trinity College of Dublin, Tsinghua University School of Economics and Management, University of California, Los Angeles, University College of London, University of St. Francis, Yale College and Graduate School

[9] Imperial College of London, King's College of London, London School of Economics, University of Amsterdam, University of California, Berkeley, University of Toronto

[10] King's College of London, Paris Sciences et Lettres University, University of Oxford

[11] MIT Venture Mentoring Service

[12] University of Amsterdam, University of Cambridge

[13] Princeton University

[14] University of Cambridge

[15] University of Copenhagen

[16] New York University

[17] The University of Hong Kong

[18] International University of Japan

[19] Imperial College, the American University of Paris, University at Albany, University College of London, University of Sheffield, University of Toronto

[20] Technical University of Denmark, Tsinghua University, University of Copenhagen

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Over time, this model was shifted, so that the focus was not so much about feedback, but more about the mentors empathizing and anticipating the needs of the students, before designing value-added activities for their monthly sessions – the core idea of the Mentor Program today. Social gatherings for mentors and mentees were also held, and many of the mentees felt so supported that they began building relationships with the mentors, who helped them with career advice and presentation skills, even outside the official sessions. A year later, academic year 2019-2020, the program was piloted in two more degrees: the Bachelor in Behavioral & Social Science and the Master in Visual & Digital Media.

Since the beginning, the academic design team at IE has tracked the satisfaction levels of the students with the Mentor Program, and has received extraordinarily positive feedback. What is perhaps most rewarding is seeing the strong sense of community flourishing, as a result of the knowledge exchange and relationship-building between mentors, students, academic directors and deans from across the different programs. Several expanded and personal accounts from the experience of mentees, mentors and mentees-turned-mentors were published on the online IE magazine "Rewire" as well as being broadcasted through IE social media channels.

> After being a... mentee guided by superb individuals throughout my [IE] experience, I took the opportunity to become a mentor myself. This program is not only beneficial for the students, but also for the mentors, allowing us to provide help and guidance to students while developing essential professional skills like workshop facilitation. What's more, it allows us to be part of a community where we get to know people from around the world and expand our network. – Dimitris Syprou, MCXI Mentee-turned-mentor.[21]

Mentorship: from the past to a future of collaboration and inclusion

Mentorship programs, if designed well, have a great, untapped potential far beyond professional networking building. Knowledge exchange has its benefits on many levels. As we saw in the case of companies, it can be leveraged as a competitive advantage to retain intergenerational wisdom. It can also help to build professional connections and provide people with a sense of belonging. However, thinking bigger about the concept of mentorship, we see an opportunity to "connect the dots" and build social systems that foster empathetic and also disruptive approaches to the future.

On a systems level, mentorship has the powerful potential to foster empathy between diverse perspectives. In a world characterized by disruption and challenges on social, environmental and governance levels, there is an urgent need for 21st century talent to think holistically. By designing spaces that cultivate knowledge and perspective exchange, we create the opportunity for greater levels of collaboration and inclusion.

In order to achieve this ambitious vision, we call upon our peers in education and design to think not only speculatively about the future, but also creatively and empathetically. With this article we hoped to provide a look to the past, in order to help us understand how we can shape the future together.

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[21] Spyrou, D.: The student becomes the master: former HST mentee Dimitris Spyrou on being a mentor in IE Rewire Magazine https://rewire.ie.edu/hst-mentee-dimitris-spyrou-being-mentor/