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Assessing the Value of Mentoring for Female Business Students

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Abstract

Industry-led mentoring is a strategic tool that can bridge the gap between academic knowledge and practical expertise, providing mentees with skills development opportunities that stretch beyond what can be learned via classroom-based educational approaches alone. Mentoring is now commonplace within organisational life, but is less common within UK university business schools. This suggests a knowledge gap in terms of understanding how mentoring can be embedded as a complementary tool to improve student skills development within business schools. The aim of this study was to explore the perceived value of industry mentorship from the perspective of the mentees, to develop a greater understanding of the potential benefits mentoring relationships at a university level can provide. Following the journey of mentees on a Women in Business mentoring programme, this study specifically explored the context of female university students. Mentees on the programme were female undergraduate and postgraduate students studying on courses within Sheffield Business School. Using a longitudinal study design, semi-structured interviews were conducted at three stages of a yearlong mentoring programme: 1. pre-mentoring, 2. during mentoring, and 3. post-mentoring. Interview transcripts were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. The findings show the value of mentoring from a mentee perspective, most notably the notion of having someone in their corner, an ability to gain personalised guidance, and the opportunity to develop a professional network. The challenges of being mentored at this level were also expressed, drawing attention to the need for pre-mentoring education to support meaningful engagement with the process, and a requirement for a clear scheme structure to guide mentees. Guided by these findings, we offer key practical recommendations to programme designers so they can successfully utilise mentoring as part of their offer to students, thus supporting university business schools to further enhance their career and skills development offerings.

Keywords: mentoring, women in business, higher education, longitudinal research

1. Introduction

Despite a greater percentage of women than men graduating from a higher education institute, with the minimum of a bachelor's degree, women are still greatly underrepresented in leadership positions, with leadership positions across a variety of industries still disproportionately held by men (Cortland & Kinias, 2019). Even for those whose aspirations do not feature leadership, barriers to entry are present for a variety of roles and industries, signalling a clear disparity between qualified women and the opportunities they feel confident to engage with.

This inequality, however, does not begin in the workplace, with contributing factors and progress inhibitors present before individuals begin their careers. In higher education settings, lack of confidence and self-belief among female students is prevalent, despite female students often showing higher attainment levels than their male counterparts (Sander & de la Fuente, 2020). The fact that female students lack confidence in their abilities and prospects is not new; in fact, it has long been reported that female students underestimate future performance (Lenney, 1977), which in turn impacts confidence levels (Corbin et al., 1983). Importantly, perception of ability is often misaligned with actual ability, resulting in students that may not reach their full potential due to their own misconceptions. For business schools, this means that efforts to empower their students, especially those facing significant barriers, are vital, ensuring that entire cohorts of students are well-rounded and armed with the toolkit needed to forge a career in business.

Defined as the personal-professional relationships that formulate strategy to develop human capacity (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021), mentoring has been seen as a useful tool for personal and professional development (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). As stated by Kram (1983), engaging with mentoring can significantly improve professional outcomes, especially for those who are early in their careers, facing the complexities of understanding one's abilities, competencies, and future goals. Mentoring can also offer development opportunities beyond what a typical classroom or training environment can provide (Barnett, 2008). Correspondingly, many professionals holding prominent positions have cited engagement with mentoring as a key contributor to their successes (Scandura, 1992), with the added value provided through being mentored found to surpass that gained through alternative means when considering advancement and promotion (Singh et al., 2009). Beyond the individual benefits, mentoring can also contribute positively to organisations and wider society; for the former, it can support productivity development, management capabilities, and strategic decision making, and for the latter, social integration, citizenship development, and community participation, to name a few (Alfred & Garvey, 2019).

At an industry level, mentoring is commonplace within many businesses worldwide, and while its specific form may differ; both formal and informal approaches can be seen (Siegel et al., 2011), it is widely used across a variety of industries to support career progression and business objectives alike. However, within UK business schools, it is largely absent, with most UK business schools offering little, or more often, no opportunity for their students to engage with a mentor (industry or otherwise). This disconnect therefore raises the question: Why aren't more business schools using this industry relevant approach? While it is accepted that the provision of beneficial mentoring can be a challenging undertaking (Stöger et al., 2021), requiring a certain level of understanding surrounding the nuances of mentoring relationships, access to appropriate mentors, and effective communication of opportunities offered, it should not be seen as an unattainable tool.

This paper will highlight the potential of mentoring to support the development of female students in business schools, addressing key challenges currently faced within the sector, and the ways in which mentoring can mitigate the impact of issues raised. To justify this perspective, the current mentoring landscape within UK business schools will be presented, with findings from a longitudinal study that followed female business students who were mentored as part of a university-based mentorship programme discussed. Following this, the authors will discuss the nature of mentoring in UK universities as uncovered within the study, providing recommendations to support the development of mentoring provisions in business schools.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Mentoring Overview

As Stokes, Monti and Larios (2025) state, mentoring is focused on how human agents – mentors and mentees – work together as part of a relationship so as to enable psycho-social support and/or career progression for the mentee (Kram, 1983). There are many different definitions of mentoring, each with a different emphasis or focus. Nevertheless, Sunderman & Orsini's definition (2023, p.41) contains elements that are common to many of those definitions:

“Mentoring is a developmental relationship often between a more experienced (e.g., older) mentor and a less experienced (e.g., younger) mentee. Mentoring relationships tend to serve a particular developmental purpose, such as leadership development, career development, or intercultural development”.

Garvey and Stokes (2022), in their earlier historical review of mentoring discourse, examine how mentoring has evolved over thousands of years into its modern form that mentors and mentees experience today. They explore how mentoring practice can be understood in terms of its modes, i.e. Group mentoring, peer mentoring, co-mentoring, e-mentoring, reverse mentoring and self-mentoring. Furthermore, as Haddock-Millar et al. (2024) have argued, mentoring discourse continues to evolve, with a contemporary and significant interest in the place of reciprocity within mentoring relationships. Nevertheless, in the main, mentoring still retains its focus on the dyadic relationship between mentor and mentee (Aris et al., 2024). Despite this broad consensus, Stokes et al. (2020) showed, in their comparative analysis of coaching & mentoring, there is still a need for a framework which can be used to explain why there are significant differences in emphasis and focus between mentoring definitions, programmes and initiatives. The main reason for these differences is due to the impact of the contexts in which different mentoring initiatives are located. The context that we are principally concerned with in this article is that of mentoring in UK institutions of higher education.

2.2. Mentoring in Higher Education

Although student mentoring is not widely used in UK business schools, there is still a significant amount of literature on mentoring in higher education more generally, across a wide range of areas of impact. For example, recent contributions include the following: Lyden's (2026) study of student mentoring on social mobility; Khan, Fang and Zeb's (2026) study, which recommends student mentoring to operationalise university social responsibility; and Werntz et al.'s (2026) study of a technology-enhanced mentoring programme. There are further examples of the depth and range of research into mentoring in higher education, particularly in the United States. For example, Taylor et al. (2025) looked at financial peer mentoring in US

colleges, Cherian and Francis (2021) compared academic enhancement mentoring programmes across two HEIs, and Antunes et al.'s (2024) study examined a similar, but smaller-scale intervention in one HEI. Findings were similar in terms of improving students' integration into the institution, increasing their sense of belonging and developing social and intercultural skills. There are also examples of mentoring at doctoral level within higher education, such as Amponsah and Agyekum's (2024) study in two culturally diverse universities. In addition, Gadson's (2025) critical autoethnography is an interesting and different example of how to conceptualise mentoring in higher education. In their systematic review of the literature on mentoring within higher education, Nabi et al. (2025) provide some useful critiques of the existing literature base. In summary, they make the following statement about the evidence base which supports the impact of mentoring in higher education:

“Notwithstanding an overall positive verdict on mentoring's career development potential, with particular emphasis on career choice and transitioning behaviour, the results are not always positive, and many nuances in the data are evident.” (Nabi et al., 2025, p.739)

They point to some inconsistencies in the types of mentoring being examined and compared e.g., peer mentoring with traditional dyadic mentoring. As Garvey and Stokes (2022) also point out, mentoring as an area of practice is often characterised by different modes of engagement, rather than coaching, which is characterised by different models of coaching practice. Hence, when critically examining mentoring research, it is important to be clear as to which mode is being engaged with. With this in mind, Nabi et al. (2025) make three main recommendations for future studies and practice. They encourage mentoring researchers to develop novel impact indicators related to emotion, such as career inspiration and passion; they suggest examining under-researched impact indicators related to non-traditional student careers (e.g. self-start-ups), and, what is particularly relevant to this paper, they suggest that greater attention be paid to the role of context and mentoring content. This is particularly important when it comes to gender and mentoring.

2.3. Gender and Mentoring

Serrano et al.'s (2023) examination of the gender gap regarding women in STEM careers in the University Complutense of Madrid (UCM, Spain) supports the view that lack of self-confidence, lack of ambition and a perceived lack of specialist knowledge are common inhibitors of female career progression. This complements earlier work done by Laukhuf and Malone (2015) in the United States, which asserts that female entrepreneurs benefit from mentoring support to help with their career progression. In Higher Education, Maguire, Anderson and Chavez's (2025, p.10) qualitative study, exploring mentoring for women in academia, concludes:

“In educational contexts, mentors can be a beacon of encouragement for women, utilizing supportive communication to offer invaluable insights and advice for navigating the complexities of their roles and opening doors for professional advancement.”

Taking a more gender-critical stance, Burgos-Lopez et al. (2025) point to some of the challenges to female advancement and progression within an HE context within Latin America, arguing that mentoring programs can significantly influence women's persistence in STEM career progression, especially when combining empowerment with inclusive male engagement.

Hence, there is significant support for mentoring women in HE contexts, as such initiatives are particularly useful in helping women to anticipate and seek to overcome barriers to entry into their chosen career path.

2.4. Research into Underrepresented Groups and Students

Mentoring as a field of inquiry is not underresearched, nor are the central arguments that posit mentoring as a positive career development tool lacking evidence; several studies have demonstrated the value that can be derived for both mentees and mentors, as well as the wider impact mentoring can offer at an organisational or broader societal level (Alred & Garvey, 2019). However, as initially identified by Jacobi (1991) and later recommended by Crisp and Cruz (2009), mentorship for those at the earliest stages of the careers, for example university students, requires greater exploration, especially where a focus on underrepresented groups within a particular field is the focus. This is further supported by more recent studies such as Read et al. (2020) that highlight the positive experiences of those who have engaged with mentoring but focus on women who have already begun their careers; crucially, the conceptualisation of mentoring experiences differs depending on career stage, therefore signalling a need for further insights into those at the beginning of their career journey – a contribution that will be made in this paper.

3. Context

3.1. The Mentoring Landscape at UK Universities

To assess the landscape of mentoring, a scoping exercise which analysed current mentorship provisions within UK universities was conducted, with a focus on the presence of mentorship for students, schemes specifically for business students, and schemes targeted at women (see Table 1). All universities listed by the Complete University Guide (2024) were included in this scoping exercise, resulting in 130 UK universities being considered. Data surrounding the provision of mentoring was gathered using university websites, student union websites, and university-owned social media accounts. While it was possible to gather data from 120 of the 130 universities listed, it is understood that some mentorship opportunities may not be publicly advertised; therefore, the following figures are provided as an informed estimate.

Of the universities that were assessed, we found that 111 offered at least 1 mentorship scheme to students, with the schemes ranging in focus (subject area or purpose), target group (gender, level of study, nationality, background) and leadership (university or student led; departmental or professional services based). Of the 111 universities providing mentorship opportunities, it was found that 29 offered schemes specifically for students on business or business-related courses. As there are currently 122 UK universities that offer business or business-related courses, this exercise demonstrates that less than a quarter of UK business schools currently provide targeted mentorship programmes for their students. Where mentorship schemes are offered for business students, they are often targeted at master's level (including MBA) students, with many provided by Careers and Employability services teams. For women specifically, only 6 universities offered mentorship schemes that were targeted at female students, with only 2 of these schemes focused on business- or business-related subjects.

TABLE 1. MENTORSHIP SCHEME OFFERING AT UK UNIVERSITIES

Offers Mentorship	Aimed at Business Students	Specifically for Female Students
111	29	6

Source: own compilation, based on Complete University Guide., 2024

3.2. Case Study Context

Recognising the potential of mentoring to reduce the inequalities felt by women and the absence of women focused mentorship schemes both internally at the university and across UK universities, the Women in Business steering group at Sheffield Hallam University (founded and led by the first author of this paper) developed a mentoring programme aimed at female undergraduate and postgraduate students which paired mentees with female industry-based senior leaders. The purpose of the scheme was to provide mentees with not only the skills that are required in the workplace, but also the increasingly vital networks that will support them as they leave the safe confines of the student status.

The resulting Women in Business mentorship scheme provided female Level 6 (final year undergraduate) and Level 7 (postgraduate) students on courses within Sheffield Business School the opportunity to be mentored by industry-based women in leadership positions who had volunteered to act as mentors for the programme. Participation in the scheme was voluntary and involved students submitting a short application form detailing their reasons for signing up for the scheme, what they hoped to gain from being mentored, and any other wishes/requirements. The mentors in the scheme also completed a short form that detailed their role, industry, and specific skills/knowledge they believed they could offer their mentee. In the studied iteration of the scheme, all students that signed up to the scheme were accepted and paired with a mentor. Mentees and mentors were matched by members of the Women in Business advisory group based primarily on the perceived alignment of the career path that the mentor had taken (e.g. financial services) and the career aspirations of the mentee (e.g. to work in financial services in the future). Mentoring pairs were not offered a choice during the matching process, as the data used by the group for matching was taken from the application/information forms that the participants had completed, as detailed above.

The structure of the mentorship scheme was developed to allow for full autonomy in meeting content and format on the part of each mentoring pair; this was done to respect the varying commitments of both mentors and mentees, to encourage meaningful relationships to be developed, and to place the onus on mentees to initiate contact and seek support as needed. As a result of this, the only requirement of the mentorship scheme was that each mentoring pair met at least three times over the course of the one-year scheme; this could take any form the pair agreed upon, including meeting in person, virtually via platforms such as Teams, or via phone. The academic team behind the steering group were available for contact for the duration of the scheme and regularly checked in with mentors and mentees via email to offer support if required.

4. Methods

The aim of the study was to explore the perceived value of industry mentorship from the perspective of the mentees to develop a greater understanding of the potential benefits mentoring relationships can provide, specifically in the context of female university students.

Additionally, this research sought to evaluate the process of mentorship schemes in business education, and using the knowledge gained, suggest guidance principles to support successful mentorship for use in educational settings.

All mentees involved in the mentorship programme were invited to take part in the study; however, participation was entirely voluntary and was not a requirement of the mentorship scheme itself. Out of the 25 mentees on the scheme, 5 volunteered to participate in the study, including both undergraduate and postgraduate students. The programme ran for 12 months, from February 2024 to January 2025, during which time participants were interviewed at three stages within the mentorship programme: 1. pre-mentoring, 2. during mentoring, and 3. post-mentoring. The interviews focused on the mentees' perceptions of their experiences of mentoring, exploring the personal and professional value they derived from the mentoring relationship, and identifying elements that contributed to its overall effectiveness. Of the 5 mentees that agreed to participate in the study, 5 completed stage 1 of the interviews, 4 completed stage 2, and 2 (1 undergraduate and 1 postgraduate) completed stage 3. This attrition over the course of the year will be further discussed in the limitations section of this paper.

Using an inductive approach, the data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework of thematic analysis. This approach allowed for themes to emerge from the data without the influence of pre-conceived ideas from the research team. As this was a longitudinal study with multiple stages, it was decided that each interview stage would first be analysed independently to identify emerging patterns and capture mentee perceptions at the present stage of the scheme. Codes were generated using a manual highlighting process that began with open coding, where any words or phrases relevant to the research aims were highlighted and added to a codebook that allowed the organisation and labelling of data. As an iterative process, the re-reading of data to ensure the same code was applied consistently to similar words/phrases was crucial. Following this, the codes were grouped into themes. After the completion of the three interview stages, and the analysis of each dataset, the initially generated themes were reviewed holistically and refined as needed to develop an insight into the overarching themes of the mentoring experience as a whole. To avoid bias, each stage of this approach was conducted by the individuals within the research team before being discussed collaboratively.

5. Results

The results indicate that mentees perceive mentoring positively, with clear benefits to being mentored cited, including having 'someone in my corner', access to industry insights, and opportunities to build a professional network. Among the themes that were revealed through thematic analysis, there were three key themes that emerged consistently across all three stages of data collection, indicating shared experiences among the mentees. While the personal views of each mentee shaped the expression of each theme, mentoring as a positive (1), factors that shape mentoring relationships (2) and lack of opportunity (3) were regularly highlighted.

5.1. Mentoring as a Positive

The most prominent theme that emerged across the three interview stages was the positive perception of being mentored. Participants explained that the support offered by their mentor was invaluable, providing them with a different perspective on challenges they were facing, made possible by the fact that they had 'done it all before'. One participant explained that while they had always felt generally supported by academic staff during their university course, mentoring provided access to support that typically goes beyond the remit of what teaching staff can offer. Additionally, the benefit of mentoring in a professional context was noted, with the positive experiences of those now in industry highlighted:

'...I had no idea what mentoring was, and now I've come into my job role I'm really grateful for that experience because a lot of the leaders that I've spoken to have talked about the importance of mentoring in their lives...'

As the participants gained further experience of being mentored, the factors that contributed to their positive perceptions became clear, with the benefits of always having someone who is there to support them referenced by all. Furthermore, due to the personal connections that developed, the mentees were able to receive tailored support that aligned with their individual goals, providing the targeted guidance participants needed but had not received through other means:

'...it was advice that no one else had given before. It wasn't like the cliché advice you get; it was quite personal'

Consequently, it was highlighted that mentoring is something that can be complementary to university studies, addressing gaps in the provision that may not be solved through academic or course-specific delivery.

This is not to say, however, that mentoring is without its challenges; uncertainty surrounding mentoring direction, mentor availability, and communication barriers can negatively impact the mentoring experience. Equally, one participant referred to feedback from fellow mentees who had not been able to develop a strong relationship with their mentor:

'I spoke to some of the people who are being mentored, and they [said that] after the first meeting they tried reaching out to them, but they are not getting them, and I'm sure it's the same for some of the mentors as well with the students.'

Based on this, discussions then moved on to exploring the factors that determine the success, or lack thereof, of a mentoring relationship.

5.2. Factors that Shape Mentoring Relationships

Overall, the results suggest that mentoring is perceived as highly beneficial by mentees, particularly where mentees have a sense of what they would like to achieve through engaging with mentoring. However, despite the importance of knowing what would ideally be gained from mentoring, factors such as communication, commitment, and mentee confidence in leading interactions were identified as the main factors that shape mentoring relationships. Interestingly, participants noted that the level of industry-specific expertise would hold less relevance, as a mentor who provides the opportunity for mentees to voice concerns and ask questions is far more valuable than a mentor that is at the top of their respective company/field.

5.2.1 Communication

When asked to explain the key features of mentoring that determine success, communication was the most mentioned requirement, with participants stating that regular, open communication was what they predicted to be the most fundamental aspect of a mentoring relationship. While the approach to meetings and other activities engaged with took place in different formats among each mentoring pair, participants stated the importance of both parties regularly checking in with each other; however, there were suggestions that fundamentally, the onus had to be on the mentees to lead.

5.2.2 Commitment

Directly aligned with the importance of communication was reference to commitment: for mentees, this centred on their commitment to their own professional development, and for mentors, it was focused on their commitment to supporting their mentee. Similar to communication, mentor commitment could be demonstrated through regularly being in contact and open to offering support; however, it also required more than just being available, as mentees cited that evidence of a clear desire to help that went beyond obligation was vital to enhance the relationship. While this is subjective in nature, mentees stated that care from their mentor could be expressed through a personalised approach to providing support that focused on the specific needs of the mentee, as opposed to generic advice that could be sought elsewhere.

5.2.3. Confidence

Acknowledging their responsibility for leading the mentoring relationship, mentees discussed the impact that confidence had on their ability to direct discussions and organise meetings. While confidence was gained through the mentoring process, participants noted hesitancy at the start of the scheme, and the negative impacts they believe this had on the progress they were able to make. Due to this, mentees suggested that self-confidence, which directly impacts the ability to take control of the relationship, is a core factor that can influence the value derived from the experience. Further to this, it was noted that confidence naturally developed through contact with the mentor; however, this is not something that mentees can develop prior to the experience.

5.3. Lack of Opportunity

The final common theme that emerged was a lack of opportunity, where participants stated that prior to engaging with this mentorship scheme, they had not had the opportunity to be mentored. In this specific context, participants noted that they had not heard of any other mentorship opportunities that were available to them at the university, but confirmed that if they had been provided with such an opportunity in the past, they would have engaged with it. Consequently, participants also stated that the absence of access to mentoring also contributed to their lack of prior understanding of what mentoring entails:

‘I definitely went into it [with no understanding of] what mentoring is. But it was one of those [cases in which] people would [say something] like, ‘Oh, it’s the best thing ever – get a mentor’, and I’d [come back with], ‘OK, [but] who, what, where and why? [Tell me], how do I do that?’

This, for many, led to a decision not to participate in the scheme, highlighting a clear barrier to engagement for students:

'People on my course didn't sign up to it because they were all saying, 'I don't know what mentoring is''

These findings suggest issues surrounding the current provision of mentoring for business school students, both from the perspective of education surrounding the use of mentoring as a tool for professional development and the opportunities provided for students to engage with such opportunities.

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the perceptions of mentees, highlighting the sources of value derived, as well as useful feedback surrounding factors that influence the nature of a mentoring relationship from a personal and structural perspective. The following discussion and recommendations will explore what these findings mean for mentoring in business education, with a focus on how mentoring can form part of a university's approach to supporting the development of its students.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight both the benefits of engaging with a mentoring scheme, from the mentee's perspective, and the challenges associated with meaningful engagement, much of which emulate the findings of previously conducted studies within the field. However, as a scheme with both mentors and mentees being female, and these mentees also being university business school students, this study provides an insight into a specific context that thus far has received little attention, despite calls to action within the literature.

For clarity, this discussion will be divided into two parts; the first, focusing on what our study tells us about mentoring, specifically for female university students, situating our findings within the context of skills development, and the second, evaluating the approach of this specific mentoring programme, highlighting successes and challenges, thus paving the way for recommendations for the future development of mentoring schemes.

6.1. What This Tells Us About Mentoring

As Haddock-Millar, Stokes and Dominguez (2023) point out, in their study of reciprocal mentoring, societal drivers and mentoring programme drivers are closely linked. In our study, it is therefore unsurprising to observe the female mentees seeing mentoring as being helpful in overcoming societal barriers to career progression, once they understood how it could help them. In other words, the more clearly that mentoring participants are able to see the connection between the aims of the mentoring programme and the broader societal issues that they are trying to address (e.g. access to influential professional networks and opportunities), the more likely they are to engage with the programme and recommend it to others. This does, however, require an understanding of what mentoring is or entails – an understanding that was highlighted as limited among participants. This suggests that mentees require support before and during the provision of mentoring to enable them to both engage with and benefit from being mentored.

Considering the factors shaping mentoring, Garvey and Stokes (2022), in their discussion of the 'skilled coachee', examine how it is common within both mentoring and coaching to place greater emphasis on the skills of the helper. Whilst the skills of the mentor were clearly important to the mentees in this study, the findings did indicate that the mentee tended to benefit more from that help when they had a stronger understanding of what they wanted from the

mentoring relationship and, crucially, were able to articulate that to their mentor. This skill in being able to frame the conversation in terms of their own needs, in turn, enabled the mentor to be able to tailor their help to address the specific needs of their mentee. The findings also confirmed that confidence, commitment and communication were all key to successful mentoring conversations and relationships. This resonates with the seminal work done on mentoring over 40 years ago by US academic, Kathy Kram. Kram (1983) argued that a key facet of mentoring was what she called the psycho-social function, including behaviours such as 'role-modelling', 'confirmation/acceptance', 'counselling' and 'friendship'. Our findings showed that this sort of support was important to the mentees, who mentioned the added value of personal, tailored help, which went beyond strategic, tactical, or technical advice about career progression. However, a mediating factor here was how confident a mentee felt in leading conversations and asking for specific help.

As Clutterbuck et al. (2017) have pointed out, most mentoring programmes result in increased personal confidence and agency for mentees. It is important to point out that this is usually an output of the mentoring process, rather than a necessary condition of engaging effectively with a mentor. In other words, mentees may have increased personal confidence as a goal for the mentoring, but, ironically, may feel the need to pre-acquire that confidence in order to make the mentoring happen, therefore, having sufficient confidence to follow up with mentors when booking sessions, and asking assertively for specific help. Some of the findings show that this dilemma about confidence was a factor in whether they engaged with the mentoring or not. Central to this engagement was the extent to which mentees were even aware of the opportunity to be mentored; the data indicates that mentees did not seem to have been aware that there were any opportunities at their university to engage with mentoring – this raises issues of communication, accessibility and visibility of mentoring programmes.

6.2. Programme Evaluation

Before providing recommendations for future provisions, it is important to first address aspects of the studied scheme that may have contributed to some challenges faced by mentors and mentees. From a reflective stance, this will primarily take the form of challenging assumptions about mentoring made by the steering group that developed and led the scheme. Within the findings of this study, three learnings emerged that point towards a requirement for approach evaluation, most notably, assumptions surrounding the seniority of the mentor, the scheme structure, and the prior knowledge and skills of mentees.

6.2.1 Seniority of Mentor

When seeking mentors, it is sometimes assumed that the higher up the career ladder an individual has climbed, the more they will have to offer a mentee: this assumption is supported by traditional, hierarchical models of mentoring. Equally, assumptions also exist surrounding the alignment or compatibility of mentor industry/role and mentee aspirations, positing that in order to derive value from the relationship, there must be a direct relationship between the two (Bush et al., 2018, p. 122; Holmes et al., 2018). It is clear from our findings, however, that this is not the case, and instead, it is the time and support the mentor can offer the mentee that is primarily valued. This is not to say that a mentor that has achieved seniority or has followed a career path that the mentee aspires to is without benefit; in fact, we know that learning from those who have experience of particular roles/industries can provide valuable insights and

guidance that may not be possible from a mentor outside of the desired field; instead, these findings highlight that assumptions surrounding the required alignment of mentor industry/role and mentee aspirations, or indeed the superiority of mentor leading to greater outcomes for the mentee, plays a lesser role in the positive perceptions held by mentees. This suggests that the approach to mentor recruitment and pairing must consider a range of variables that stretch beyond position and field. For example, pairing based on values has been found to derive positive outcomes (Illies & Reiter-Palmon, 2018; Kirsch et al., 2025). Equally, a more 'spontaneous' approach to pairing may also be effective, especially where the mentors have a combination of broad experiences, appropriate training on how to mentor, and skills such as empathetic relationship building (Cox, 2005) and communication (Clutterbuck, 2014, p. 42).

6.2.2. Scheme Structure and Prior Knowledge and Skills of Mentees

In addition to the assumptions made surrounding the mentors, there were also two assumptions made that centred on the mentees. First, that flexibility surrounding methods of engagement with the scheme would be beneficial to mentees, allowing individual needs to be met through a personalised approach that is individually led. Second, that students would understand what mentoring is, why they should engage, and how to navigate the process to derive individual benefit.

The flexibility of this mentoring scheme was for many a key draw to participation; free from the confines of a strict structure, mentors and mentees were able to approach the mentoring relationship in a way that suited their individual needs; however, what received less consideration was the support mentees would require to effectively engage with the scheme, considering the flexibility offered. Consequently, and as confirmed by the discussion of confidence, mentees require support before and during the provision of mentoring to enable them to both engage and benefit from being mentored. Similarly, for many students, engaging with a mentoring scheme during their studies may be their first experience of professional engagement and development, which naturally can be both daunting and difficult to navigate, not least if they're not fully sure what being mentored entails. As the scheme was aimed at final year undergraduates and postgraduates, there was an assumption that students would not only know what support they needed, but also how to acquire it; evidently, this was oversimplifying the situation. While some students may know what support they need, they may not be confident in asking the right questions, or conversely, a student may be incredibly confident in asking for support but may not know what support they need. This, therefore, signals a need for a supportive structure that not only guides mentees as they navigate what is likely their first experience of

being mentored but also prepares them for this experience in the first place. While flexibility and personalisation were noted as benefits of the scheme in some instances, there were also clear gaps in the provision that meant for some mentoring pairs, greater support was needed: for future mentoring schemes, the integration of education surrounding mentoring and structured support for the duration of the scheme is crucial.

Notwithstanding the above evaluation, it must be acknowledged that, as this was the first iteration of the mentoring scheme, there was an acceptance amongst stakeholders that there may be some teething issues, and therefore any challenges faced should not be seen as a failure of the scheme, but rather a learning opportunity to support future schemes. This notion applies to mentoring

schemes more broadly; they do not have to be perfect in order to be beneficial, and it should be expected that evaluation and refinement become a central part of any mentoring programme.

7. Recommendations for Practice

Using the findings of this study and the learnings of the steering group, the following recommendations have been developed:

- a) **Embed mentoring into the curriculum** – as suggested by our findings, several potential mentees failed to take advantage of the mentoring opportunity because they were unsure what mentoring was or because they had not even heard of the opportunity. Including mentoring (and coaching) as content areas within people-focused modules/courses seems to be an obvious solution to this.
- b) **Train mentees in mentoring skills** – as we suggest in the discussion above, it makes sense for universities to invest some time in supporting mentees to develop the skills needed to be an effective mentee. This will encourage student mentees to take ownership of their own learning and increase their sense of personal agency, which can only benefit them in their wider studies and development.
- c) **Define a clear programme structure** – programme structure should and will differ based on individual context; however, it is beneficial to provide clear guidance surrounding the expectations of the scheme, especially surrounding approaches to mentor/mentee meetings, and support this through activities such as regular touchpoints and progress tracking.
- d) **Recruit mentors based on qualities, not position or seniority** – recruit and pair mentors based on time available, commitment to the development of students, and the ability to share skills and knowledge, as opposed to seniority, specific role, or length of service. While students may initially value the title or background of a mentor, it is the support they can offer that determines the meaningfulness of the relationship and the potential for positive outcomes to be derived.
- e) **Remember that personal development is still important** – in a context where many universities – particularly those who deliver Degree Apprenticeship programmes – are focused on knowledge, skills & behaviours (KSBs), it is still important to remember that students are still developing, more broadly, as people, and that they should not lose sight of the overarching personal development journey they are on.
- f) **Recognise that learning is often emergent** – when evaluating the impact of mentoring programmes, it is important to remember that learners often only recognise the benefit of what they have learned, in hindsight. Timing of evaluation is therefore critical – mentees may not fully realise the benefit of the experience to them until several months afterwards.
- g) **Begin with the end in mind** – published mentoring research from a range of sectors tells us mentoring is good for employee retention; it is also good for student retention by universities. By identifying what key metrics they expect to be positively impacted by mentoring, university stakeholders can properly evaluate the impact and added value of mentoring to their offer to students; these can be individually focused (e.g. promoting increased personal confidence) or institutionally focused (e.g. reducing the degree awarding gap and enhancing graduate employment post award).

8. Limitations

As highlighted in section 4., over the one-year period in which data was collected, there was participant attrition. While this is not uncommon in longitudinal studies, it is accepted that this may have influenced the breadth of perspectives captured. Despite this, rich, in-depth data was collected through the three stages of semi-structured interviews, enabling meaningful thematic analysis to take place. Furthermore, as the participants were at different educational levels (undergraduate and postgraduate), varied perspectives on the experience of mentoring were gathered, contributing to a nuanced understanding of mentee perceptions.

Consideration should also be given to the implications of participant self-selection on bias and the transferability of the results, as participants who chose to participate may differ from non-participants in terms of personality, motivation, and other relevant traits (Galloway, 2005). The findings of this study should therefore be interpreted with these limitations in mind. Future research may benefit from a larger sample to account for potential attrition and to represent a wider range of individuals.

9. Conclusion

The provision of mentoring for personal and professional development is seen widely at an industry level; however, its application is currently lacking at UK universities, especially within business schools. Given the widely reported benefits of mentoring, especially in the professional business context, the lack of such provisions at a university level is surprising, especially where institutions are directing their focus to authentic, industry-focused learning. Consequently, this not only limits the number of development opportunities for students, but also the exposure to industry professionals and commonly used development approaches; this lack of prior exposure to, or training surrounding, the skills required for mentoring may result in future missed mentoring opportunities if learning does not take place at this early stage in their careers.

The aim of the study was to explore the perceived value of industry mentorship from the perspective of mentees to develop a greater understanding of the potential benefits mentoring relationships can provide, specifically in the context of female university students. The aim of this paper, therefore, was to provide academics, professional services staff, and business school leadership teams with actionable insights into industry-led mentoring for female business students to support the development of provisions that can further support the learning of their own students. While this study and the resulting discussion focus on a specific context, the findings and learnings are transferable more broadly, therefore providing insights that can be directly applied to other contexts, with increased relevance to those focused on underrepresented groups.

This study has demonstrated the benefits of mentoring for female business school students from their own perspective, highlighting the factors that contributed to the perceived positive outcomes of being mentored and what this may mean for future mentoring schemes. While it is acknowledged that the provision of mentoring is not without its challenges, there is a wealth of evidence provided within this study, and those referred to throughout, which suggests that mentoring schemes within business schools could have a significant positive impact upon the development of students, supporting them to overcome barriers to progression, improve personal skills, and understand the realities of the working world. By utilising the knowledge, skills, and experiences of industry

mentors, students are able to learn from those who have ‘done it all before’, thus providing another method through which they can enhance the learning gained during their university studies.

The recommendations resulting from this study enable readers to develop their own industry-focused mentoring programmes, with actionable steps provided to avoid the barriers posed by incorrect assumptions and to develop a scheme that meets the needs of mentees. As previously stated, a mentoring scheme does not need to be ‘perfect’ to be beneficial; therefore, the recommendations made should be considered and adjusted in line with the context within which they seek to be applied.

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Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Sheffield Hallam University Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number ER60189149). All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, participants could withdraw at any time, and all data were anonymised prior to analysis.

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