Corporate Mentor Partner Program (CMPP)

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Abstract

At Alliance Manchester Business School (AMBS) it was identified from a post-graduation survey that certain groups of students on specific programs were lagging their peers in employment and salary post-graduation. Despite an extensive career service and support functions, it was clear that something new was needed to try to support the identified group. The idea of a mentoring program was identified. What made this mentoring program unique was the focus on working in partnership with specific organisations and aligning Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) goals of organisations with targeting specific student groups, giving equitable and inclusive possibilities to students.

The article will discuss how a mentoring program was set up, how a platform was selected, and different type of matching applied. It discusses observations of logistics and emotions and reflects on what could have been done differently for a better student experience. The submission also reflects on mentor's and mentee's lack of skills, engagement and initiative (or lack of). The article will also reflect on learnings taken from the initial first pilot project and how these can and will be implemented differently in next year's pilot.

Keywords: Mentor, CSR, initiative, platforms, matching

Summary

The CMPP program was set up at Alliance Manchester Business School (AMBS) in response to a specific group of students lagging in performance in comparison to their peer's post-graduation. CMPP was unique in that it set out to fulfil the goals of not just mentor and mentee but also additional stakeholders, such as individual companies and the wider university. The benefits for the organisations were numerous such as supporting their CSR goals as well as developing staff internally and provide direct access to future talent.

The usage of an online mentoring platform supported the program. The key features required in choosing a platform included a simple interface, clear matching functions, multi program ability and extensive evaluation tools. The platform had several matching features, including self-matching and smart (automatic matching). On

reflection, we noted that for different reasons there was a lack of initiatives from students in that they would not reach out to mentors asking for matches. This caused some delay in the overall matching process and some disengagement. Future programs will have clear contracting rules for program participants.

Project Background

At AMBS we have over 6,000 students across both Undergraduate and Postgraduate programs. We have a varied student body from a wide international reach. With Social Responsibility as part of "Our Future strategy", (University of Manchester, 2023) we consider equality and inclusion high priority. There were several factors contributed to the initiative of setting up a new mentoring program at AMBS. One of the main drivers was that it was noticed that certain groups of graduates were lagging their peers after graduation. The identified student group were Asian females. There was also a fall in the FT rankings for some programs (Financial Times, 2023).

At University of Manchester, we have an extensive career service and many other support functions. However, it seemed like we needed something else, and we had to try a new approach. At the time of identifying the lagging group of students, AMBS did not have a mentoring program. The benefits of mentoring are well known (Grima et al., 2014; Koch and Johnson, 2000; Holloway, 2001).

There have been mentoring programs in the past at AMBS. However, these have been of varied success due to admin burden, lack of commitment and difficulty in monitoring and evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the program. In the past program has relied on goodwill of alumni and possibly other external individuals who wanted to give back. The application, sign up, recruitment and matching of mentor and mentees has mainly been a manual and administrative process. Matching had been of limited success. One of the reasons Mentoring programs have not stayed alive is because of the administrative burden, monitoring and following up as well as a proper evaluation (MentorCloud, 2021; Clutterbuck, 2011).
Due to resource limitations of the employability lead, who would be the person responsible for the program, admin burden had to be reduced. Also due to being in the middle of the Covid pandemic, an online platform seemed to be the most efficient solution (Sherman and Camilli, 2014).

After a discussion between the AMBS Advisory and the employability lead of AMBS, the idea of a different type of mentoring program was born. The advisory board has members from local organisations and there had always been a desire to strengthen relationships between the organisations and AMBS. This new mentoring program would work with local and individual organisations in partnership on unique mentoring program. Each program would be able to focus on a specific group of students with the purpose of enhancing student outcome and strengthen external organisation relations. The idea of the Corporate Mentor Partner Program (CMPP) was established.

Discussion

Whilst there are many learnings that came out from the first pilot of the CMPP, this discussion will focus on three main areas:

1. The engagement of several stakeholder and how each stakeholder could take away unique benefits.
2. The importance of reduced admin burden and the benefits of using an online platform versus a manual process
3. The engagement of participants and the matching process

1) Historically mentoring programs have focused mainly on the benefits for the mentee and possibly the mentor. However, the new CMPP, would involve additional stakeholders that could benefit; two additional stakeholders - the Corporates (the organisations) and the University (the institution).

What was unique and different with this mentoring program was the aligning of several stakeholder's agenda. For many organisations Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is part of the strategy and therefore is a priority on many organisations' agenda. Some organisations align with the UN2030 agenda 17 goals (United Nations, 2023) and some have expanded on these.

For many organisations goals on the CSR agenda include access to education, diversity and inclusion, community initiatives, empowering minority groups, good health and wellbeing, gender equality, volunteering etc. It is hard for a CSR aware organisation to not engage with this specific mentoring program. It aligns and meets numerous goals and priorities. It also sheds a positive light on the organisation showing they are willing and want to invest in their own people too.

The benefits for the organisation are numerous; but the key things are.
a) engaging and supporting CSR goals,
b) develop staff internally
c) a direct access to a potential talent pool for recruitment
d) an opportunity for further collaboration with the university in possible research projects, guest lectures etc

As a result, we very quickly had organisations lined up wanting to engage. We choose three organisations for the initial pilot. Those were BNY Mellon, Siemens and Page Group. As expected, we had a huge interest from students and more mentees than we could provide mentors.

For the university, the wider stakeholder engagement benefits included:
a) Building new relationships with external organisations
b) Opportunity for Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP)
c) Support for the Careers Service in enhancing and supporting employment for students

2) Attempts of mentoring programs had been done in the past at the university. However, due to heavy admin burden, reliance on specific staff and lack of monitoring and evaluation possibility, the programs had not lasted very long. Due to the limited resources for setting up the CMPP (only the employability lead with 10% work allocation) and the ongoing Covid pandemic, it was clear that an online solution was needed.

A process started of trying to identify a suitable online platform. The employability lead had identified five main features and functions that were required from the platform. The functions included both logistics (reduced admin), but also feature for matching and monitoring. As a minimum, the platform should include:

a) set up and run several programs in parallel
b) have a simple sign-up process,
c) effective matching features and process
d) simple monitoring tool, including prompts and easy reporting for evaluation,
e) user-friendly and easy to use for both mentors and mentees

3) Simply because of size, we knew setting up a program would be challenging and demanding. Therefore, to help identify and segment our large student population, we created a "catalogue" of our programs in AMBS. For each program we outlined, numbers, gender, and any other available and official demographics data for the year. This included Undergraduate programs and Master's programs.

The catalogue was shared with the selected organisations who then gave wishes on which group of students to mentor. There was some guidance from the AMBS mentoring team on which students to focus on given the background to setting up the initiative.

We set up six separate programs. The programs focused on different student groups, defined by program, year of study, gender, background, widening participation etc. Each program targeted a separate group of students. Each program also used a different type of matching. As we ran them separately, we could evaluate how the different type of matching worked and what was most effective which is discussed in Output and Impact.

Based on the reasons and initiatives for the CMPP, in the initial pilot selection process, as an overall theme, females in 2nd year of study as well as females on MSc level were targeted. The program did not discourage males from applying. The second-year students were targeted to make sure we could support them in enhancing and building their employability skills early on.

Matching is an important feature for success of mentoring relationships(Guider, 2021). The platform we finally selected offered three main types of matching;

a) Manual matching, where the administrator matches up participants.

b) Self select/with or without recommendations, this is where mentors and mentees reach out to a mentor asking for a match. It requires some initiative from the participants

c) Smart match. An algorithm for matching is used based on what the mentee is looking for and what a mentor can offer in support. The matching is triggered by a "click" on a specific date by the administrator.

Outcomes and Impact

There were several outcomes with different level of impact in regard to the pilot CMPP:

1) Output and learnings for the different stakeholders
2) Initiatives and rules of engagement
3) Impact of program and future program

1) The real impact came from the importance of getting the sign-up sheet correct – with the relevant information, skills and possibilities. This included not just what the mentees wanted to get out the mentoring relationship, but also from a mentor's point of view what areas/skills the mentors felt they could add value.

The "master sign-up sheet" was developed in conjunction with the three pilot organisations, which was important to make sure we had a fully comprehensive and inclusive approach, but also to make sure it was a collaborative/partnership effort.

Upon reflection, one of the key outputs and unexpected learnings for the organisations was understanding of their staff's skills, or lack of skills from data observed from the sign-up sheets. One organisation noted that several of their mentors did not feel they could help in for example innovation or networking, which were skills that the organisation would desire their employees to have. As a result, the organisations that have engaged with the mentor program have been able to identify and support their staff in further development needs.

Another main reflection was also on the development of the organisations own staff taking part in the program. One of the organisations reflected upon that they should encourage and engage younger employees to become mentors. As such they could enhance the student experience by being able to provide more support around interviews, CV's etc as the younger mentors had gone through this themselves recently.

2) In the sign-up process, the instructions explained to students that we would apply "Self-select matching". This was for student and mentors to have the best opportunity to find a suitable match. This did not happen. Most students did not reach out to mentors, and we had to initiate "Smart match" to get the matching process completed.

On reflection there are two things to highlight: Many students were not showing initiatives. They signed up but then did not further engage. We later learnt that there was a cultural element making students hesitating to contact "senior people", despite signing up. The other impact was that due to the delay of the matching process, this caused some disengagement from participants, not knowing if they would be matched or actually gained a place on the program.

We also noted that students did not know what the CMPP was and the possibilities it could offer. It was not understood by some students that this was an exclusive opportunity and required active engagement with the program. As a result of these observations and to avoid disengagement, for future programs, we will have to set up clear contracting and commitment rules adhered to by the students and mentors. Additional admin and program support is also required to make sure students can get more instant reply to enquiries, any technical issues can be noted and resolved easily, evaluation and analytics are clearly monitored, and "non-engagers" can be notified and if required, removed from the program to give the opportunity to another student.

3) The pilot program despite all its "learning points" was considered a success. Mentor and mentees were asked to complete an anonymous post program evaluation survey. Whilst there was a low participation rate and the full details of the survey are not discussed in this paper, post program feedback stated overall positive feedback. One student stated: *"I received lots of support from my mentor N in this program. She did help me a lot, such as provide advice for my mock interview, introducing internship opportunities to me. I am really appreciative for this program*."

The project has been granted to run for a second year to get an opportunity to inform and share practise. It is also the opportunity to implement learnings from the first pilot to improve both the student experience as well as the organisational experience. A further investigation of platforms will take place. This is to make sure that we can enhance the student experience, across all the areas of sign-ups, matching, evaluation, or communication. A wider range of organisations would be desirable. This will enhance the student experience in a way of offering a broader and possibly a more varied mentoring program.

Regarding sharing best practise, the CMPP have been presented by the author at numerous conferences nationally. The response has been well received and further engagement between universities has been made sharing the process and set up. In addition, a comparative study has been undertaken by the Career service at University of Manchester, comparing a paper based individual mentor approach vs the CMPP. The project is expected to be completed by end 2023.

Conclusion

To conclude; from having identified a group of students who needed more support due to lagging peers after graduation, we have managed to engage and align goals and agendas of global corporations to act on a local level in partnership with the university. The CMPP has identified numerous benefits for all stakeholders involved. The usage of an online platform combined with clear contracting rules is required for an effective and impactful mentoring program. Mentoring can and should benefit everyone. It is no longer just about individual mentees and mentors; it is about the organisations, the university, and the wider community.

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