



WESTMINSTER MENTORING CIRCLES 2019/20

EVALUATION REPORT

July 2020

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Research Coach Ltd

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University of Westminster Mentoring Circles Scheme

Nov 2019 – June 2020 – Project summary and evaluation

1. Introduction

In November 2019 the University of Westminster initiated a group Mentoring Circle scheme to support the professional development of early-career academics (role grades below Reader). The Mentoring Circles scheme was supported by the University of Westminster Research Office and sponsored/promoted within the three University Colleges by the College Research Directors. [Research Coach Ltd](#) provided consultancy support including guidance for implementation, scheme communications, training for mentors/mentees, facilitation support for initial circle group meetings, ad-hoc support/guidance for mentors, phase one project evaluation.

This evaluation report summarises the scheme uptake and feedback for the Mentoring Circles scheme and provides recommendations for consideration by the University of Westminster when planning future mentoring initiatives for early career academic staff.

2. Scheme overview

The Mentoring Circles scheme was open to early-career academics (grades below Reader) from the three University Colleges, one circle group per college. A maximum of 8 mentee places were available for each group, with groups scheduled to meet four times between Jan – June 2020 (*Note: following participant registrations, the maximum group size was extended to 10 to accommodate all registered participants*). Each circle group meeting had a different discussion theme. Themes were decided by mentors in consultation with their College Research Director (See Appendix 1 for information about discussion themes for each College).

Circle Mentors (2 per group) were drawn from faculty members in each College. All mentors attended a mentoring briefing session with the mentoring facilitator (Natalie James, Research Coach Ltd) before leading their first mentoring circle session. N James attended the first mentoring session for each college, to provide additional facilitation support and any appropriate feedback to inform later sessions.

The scheme was advertised by College Research Directors in their respective Colleges in December 2019. An optional scheme information session, facilitated by Natalie James, was held on 14th January 2020 for prospective mentees to clarify scheme expectations and to network before joining a circle group.

To enable participants to plan for and schedule their commitment, the scheme communications for prospective mentees included the names of mentors, dates of the four mentoring circle meetings and the discussion topics for each circle group meeting. Upon registering for the scheme, participants were asked to indicate whether they were able to attend all four sessions.

Initial sessions began in January 2020 and all sessions were concluded by end of June 2020. Although all groups planned for their meetings to be in-person, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the mentoring groups to conduct their sessions from April 2020 onwards online via Microsoft Teams meetings. Despite the disruption, all groups maintained their meeting schedule and completed their four sessions.

Following their fourth mentoring circle sessions, all mentors and mentees were invited to complete a feedback questionnaire exploring their experiences of the scheme and ideas for improvements/future developments. The mentee survey received 15 responses (out of a possible 28, 54% response rate) and the mentor survey received 5 responses (out of a possible 6, 83% response rate) The survey outcomes form the basis for the scheme evaluation and are the focus of the following sections of this document.

3. Scheme uptake and attendance

For a group mentoring scheme, group dynamics play an important role in the success of the mentoring programme. To take full benefit from the sessions, it is desirable that participants attend all meetings to get to know other group members and to establish continuity in the group dynamics. For this reason, steps were taken in the planning and communications of the scheme to ensure participants had (a) the support of their College for their full participation and (b) knowledge of the commitment involved and the scope of the scheme; steps included:

- Encouragement from College Research Directors for early career staff participation
- Notification of the group mentors before registration
- Confirmation of all session dates in the scheme advertisements/communications before registration
- Confirmation of discussion topics for all sessions in scheme advertisements/communications before registration
- Mentee briefing session with the mentoring facilitator before first mentoring meetings

3.1 Registrations and indicative session commitment

Following the scheme advertisement in Colleges, 28 individuals registered as mentees:

- 8 from the College of Design, Creative and Digital Industries (DCDI)
- 10 from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS)
- 10 from Westminster Business School (WBS)

All registered participants were accepted onto their respective College mentoring circle group. Of those registered, approximately 19 attended the scheme information session. All respondents to the mentee feedback questionnaire that attended the information session rated it as either 5/5 'very useful' (50% respondents) or 4/5 'somewhat useful' (50% respondents).

Upon registration for the scheme, participants were asked to confirm whether they could attend all four mentoring circle sessions. In the responses:

- 21 participants (6 DCDI, 8 LAS, 7 WBS) said they could attend all four sessions
- 3 participants (2x LAS, DCDI) said they would need to miss one date due to prior commitments
- 2 participants ((WBS, DCDI) said they would need to leave 2 sessions early due to teaching commitments
- 1 participant (WBS) said 'no' (*they couldn't commit to all four sessions*)
- 1 participant (WBS) did not answer

3.2 Session attendance

Session attendance was variable within each of the College mentoring circle groups. Across all groups, the average number of participants per session was 4.8 out of a possible 8-10 spaces per group. The earlier (in-person) sessions were less well attended than the later (online) sessions in each group. Low/sporadic session attendance from participants was cited by the majority (4/5) of the mentor respondents as a key frustration/challenge of the scheme.

In the mentee survey, respondents were asked how many sessions they attended and answers ranged from 2 – 4 sessions. The average number of sessions attended by respondents of the survey was 3. There were no respondents to the survey who attended 1 or no sessions. Attendance figures would suggest there are several original registrants to the scheme that did not attend any mentoring circle sessions, although as registers were not taken for the sessions, this cannot be confirmed.

Respondents that selected 'partially met my expectations' were asked 'how could the scheme have better met your expectations'? To this, the mentor respondent indicated better attendance from colleagues to improve consistency. Mentee responses indicated some challenges in group dynamics and that some more practical support such as reviewing work in progress and research grant examples would have been helpful.

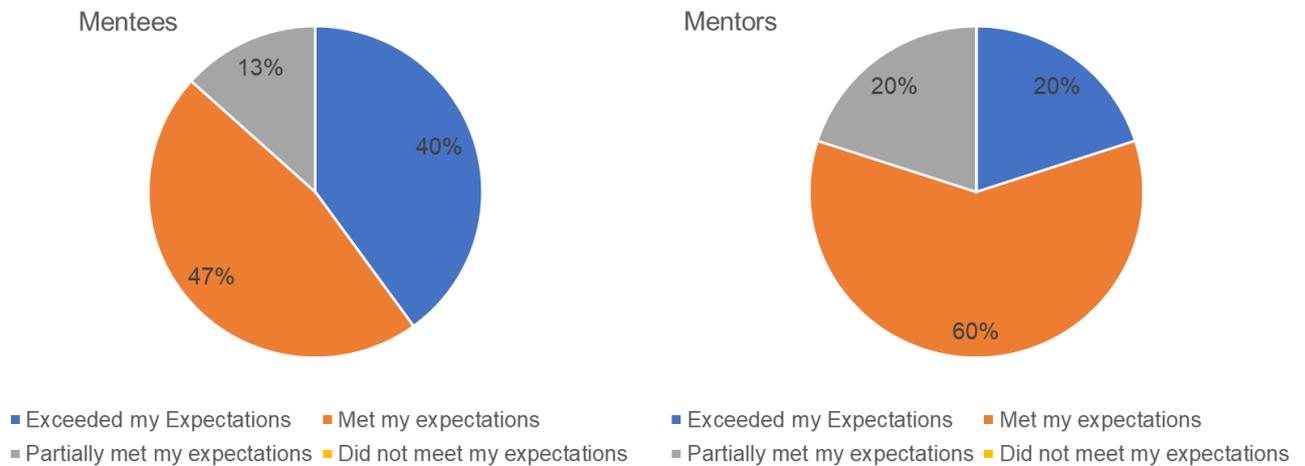


Figure 3. Pie charts showing mentee/mentor responses to the question 'To what extent did the mentoring circles scheme meet your expectations?'

Mentors were asked some additional questions to ascertain how (a) confident and (b) supported they felt in their mentoring role. The results are presented in figure 4 and demonstrate that all mentors felt either extremely or somewhat confident in their roles and responsibilities.

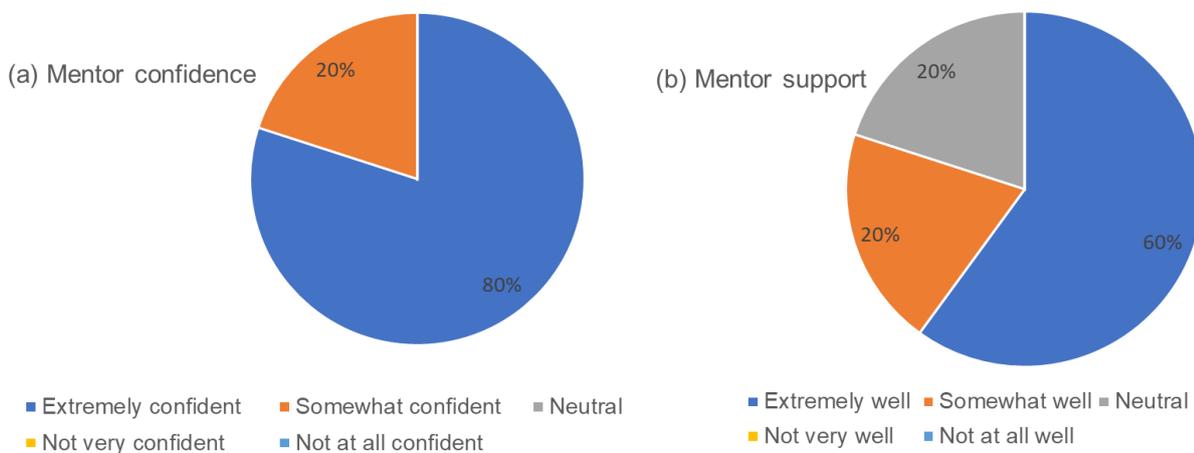


Figure 4. Mentor responses to (a) their level of confidence with their mentoring roles and responsibilities and (b) the extent to which they felt supported in their mentoring role

The mentor that rated themselves as 'somewhat confident' said:

"I am not sure that any training would have helped me. I think, although help and advice is always helpful, that this is something that one can only learn through experience. The COVID19 situation has completely changed the dynamics of these sessions. However, this was something nobody could have prepared me for."

The majority of mentors (80%) felt either extremely well or somewhat well supported in their mentoring role. The mentors that gave lower ratings to the support question indicated that 'more flexibility' in the structure of the scheme and more 'check-ins' with mentors at later stages of the scheme would have been helpful.

5.2 Session format

In the original scheme design, it was envisaged that all mentoring circles sessions would be conducted in-person. All groups conducted their initial sessions in-person but, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the later sessions were moved to an online format via Microsoft Teams. The groups from LAS and WBS conducted 2 meetings in-person and 2 meetings online, the DCDI group conducted 1 meeting in-person and 3 meetings online.

All participants that experienced both in-person and online mentoring sessions were asked to state their format preference. 100% of the mentee and 80% of the mentor respondents to this question preferred the in-person meeting format. The key frustration noted by participants concerning online sessions was from the group(s) where the meetings were audio only to preserve bandwidth:

"Due to COVID the sessions moved online, which worked but it would have been better to have the chance to meet colleagues from other departments face to face, we had to turn videos off to save bandwidth so I sometimes I found it hard to follow who was speaking."

"since it moved online it was reduced to online chat and no visual. so it was impossible to read body language. felt like a phone call"

5.3 Benefits for Mentees

Mentee respondents to the feedback questionnaire were asked to identify any benefits taken from their participation in mentoring sessions. The responses grouped into the following key themes (numbers in parentheses denote the number of mentions):

- Support and guidance from mentors and peers (6)
- A sense of encouragement/confidence/motivation with roles and responsibilities (e.g. research) (5)
- Practical support with publications/papers (4)
- Discussing issues with people who share the same concerns/challenges – generating ideas/solutions together (3)
- Meeting colleagues from other departments and hearing a range of perspectives (2)
- Learning about the organisation (1)

The following quotes summarise the key sentiments of the mentees in relation to the benefits they experienced:

“I found it helpful to hear from other colleagues and particularly the mentors who were very open in sharing their knowledge and experience and we touched on many important key areas. I also thought it was helpful to have colleagues from a range of departments as they brought different perspectives to the conversation.”

“I felt supported, heard and inspired”

“It was extremely beneficial. I was encouraged to share many issues in a supportive and inclusive environment, and felt heard and supported. It was very useful to hear the perspectives of both my peers and the mentors on various aspects of research and academic life.”

“I learnt a lot about Westminster as an organisation and learnt that you are really very much on your own when working on your career.”

“I gained confidence; suggestions for places to send my papers (fields I had not considered); encouragement; someone who read two of my papers and commented (really valuable)”

“Support and guidance from the mentors who are research leaders with a lot of knowledge and experience in their research areas. Opportunity to raise issues that I faced to the group to get ideas on getting solutions to them. Empathy and group support. New ideas and using the group as a spring board. ”

“encouragement; support; guidance towards journals”

“I understood how to get into research as I have not undertaken any research, for a long time.”

“Insight into the publication process and encouragement from the others.”

“solidarity in experiences, openness, techniques re handling academia”

5.4 Benefits for Mentors

Mentors were also asked to identify the benefits of their participation in the scheme which included:

- A sense of being valued
 - Learning from other disciplines with different practices
 - Making new connections with colleagues from other schools/departments
 - Learning from their co-mentor
 - Reflection on own experiences as a researcher and issues for early-career academics
-

“I think I learned a lot from other disciplines that have very different practices that mine. The group was very diverse, sometimes to the extreme. The meaning of research in our College is very different from one School to another which made it difficult sometimes to find common grounds. On the other hand this was also interesting and exciting.”

“Hearing the wisdom of the participants and their clear-sighted appraisal of their strengths and weaknesses and the support available to them. I very much enjoyed meeting some colleagues for the first time and in particular I learnt a lot from my co-leader”

“It helped me reflect upon myself as a researcher and what I would have liked to hear at an early career stage”

5.5 Feedback for mentors

Mentees were invited to provide some feedback on their mentors. 100% comments expressed positive sentiments, recognising the helpfulness, support and empathy of all mentors engaged in the scheme. A representative sample of feedback on mentors from each college group is provided below:

DCDI

“Thank you May and Tamas, I found this very helpful!”

“[my mentors] They were really great!”

“I felt that my mentors were very helpful.”

LAS

“The mentors were great listeners and gave everyone a chance to participate. They created a safe space for everyone.”

“Our mentors were generous, supportive and thoughtful in their advice and help. I very much appreciate them giving up their time to take part in the scheme. They shared their experiences, good and bad, and were open and giving with the group.”

WBS

Both mentors, Prof. David and Prof. Alan, were very supportive, giving the insight and sharing personal experience of the research world.

“Mentors were very good and they tried to broaden the area and opportunities available in research. [...] Supportive environment provided by the mentors helps and encourages to get on with research.”

5.6 Frustrations/challenges with the scheme

Mentee and mentor respondents to the feedback questionnaire were asked to identify any challenges or frustrations they encountered with the Mentoring Circles scheme.

As previously discussed, the primary frustration amongst mentors was the low attendance/sporadic attendance of the mentees, with 4/5 mentor respondents identifying this as a challenge. Other issues identified by mentors included challenges with managing the expectations of the mentees about what the scheme could/could not deliver and difficulties in getting mentees to take a proactive approach to their career and workload management.

Amongst the mentee respondents, 4/15 stated that they did not encounter any challenges/frustrations. From the remaining respondents, the main challenges/frustrations reported by mentees are summarised overleaf (number of mentions in parentheses):

- Difficulties with meeting dynamics following the shift to online meetings (4) (see section 5.2 'session format')
- Challenges with being able to attend the meetings due to other work commitments taking priority (4)
- Would have appreciated more attendees (2)
- Power structures and difficulties with having mixed grades/career stages in the same group (2)

6. Mentoring and early career support in the future

6.1 Interest in scheme continuation

In both mentor and mentee surveys, there was clear enthusiasm for the continuation of the Mentoring Circles scheme. 93% of mentee respondents said they would like to continue to meet with their cohort for further peer discussions and 93% of mentees said they would be interested in participating in the mentoring scheme again, with 8 saying they would like to participate as a mentee again and 6 saying they would be interested to participate as a mentee and/or a mentor. 100% of mentors said they would participate in the scheme again as a mentor.

Specific comments relating to scheme continuation from the surveys included:

"Pls don't discontinue. The interest taken by the mentors is so worthwhile. Yesterday's session covered a lot of ground of real interest which would not have been aired anywhere else. These forums are just so valuable!"

"I would like to see this group continue with more sessions till the end of this year"

"This was a great initiative, I hope it continues and develops."

"Please don't stop the circles. I've felt completely unsupported until the circles started. I want the support for my original research that I give to my students: i.e. short, focussed 10-minute meetings between longer discussions (such as we have in the mentoring groups) and occasional reading of drafts. Until the mentoring circles I had none of that - and I really appreciate it."

6.2 Participant suggestions for scheme improvements

Mentors and mentees were asked to identify any potential improvements that could be made to the scheme if it were to continue in future years. Recommendations grouped into the following themes (number of mentions in parentheses):

- More structure including prep work between sessions and some measures of progress and accountability for mentees (4)
- Building in opportunities for 1:1 support as well as group mentoring (2)
- More subject/discipline-specific groupings (2)
- Run the groups for longer/throughout the academic year (2)
- Have hands-on/practical sessions for example writing sessions, reviewing work in progress (2)
- Better attendance/commitment from mentees (2)
- If running sessions online encourage all members to use video (1)
- More emphasis on setting mentee expectations of the scheme (1)
- Better promotion/advertisement of the scheme, perhaps emails from Heads of School. (1)

6.3 Other professional development support for early-career academic staff

Mentees and mentor survey respondents were invited to make suggestions for any additional/alternative professional development support that should be available for early-career staff at Westminster. A range of suggestions were provided that grouped into the following themes (number of mentions in parentheses)

- Practical training for starting in research (e.g. introduction to research funding, research methodologies, developing research ideas, publications strategies) (8)
- Practical support for writing and publications (e.g. writing retreats, feedback on work) (3)
- Opportunities for collaboration and co-authorship on research projects (3)
- One-to-one coaching/mentoring support (2)
- Discipline-specific mentoring (1)
- Peer support (1)
- Funding for conference attendance and small grants (1)
- Early career network with regular meetings and guest speakers on ECR topics (1)
- Information about promotion and progression (1)

7. Concluding remarks

It is testament to the engagement and commitment of the mentors and mentees that despite the significant disruption caused by the COVID-19 crisis, all mentoring circle groups continued with their scheduled meetings and completed the full mentoring circle programme. The groups were able to quickly adapt to the new circumstances and transfer their meetings online and enable the participants to continue to benefit from the discussions with peers and mentors. Indeed most groups saw an increase in participation following the shift to online meetings.

Mentors and mentees were able to identify a range of benefits gained from their participation in the scheme. There was a good level of overall satisfaction in the scheme with 100% survey respondents willing to recommend the mentoring circles scheme to other colleagues. Mentors felt confident and supported in their mentoring roles and responsibilities and mentees were satisfied with their mentors and particularly noted their helpfulness, support and encouragement.

Despite several mitigating actions put in place at the start of the scheme to encourage good attendance and commitment from mentees, attendance was still a primary challenge of the scheme, with the average session attendance being only half of full group capacity, which was a source of frustration for the majority of mentors and some mentees. Other challenges noted included challenges with the group dynamics, particularly for online 'audio only' meetings and other work commitments making it difficult for mentees to prioritise the mentoring sessions.

Scheme participants made some suggestions for future improvements to the scheme if it were to be continued and were also able to identify some additional support that could be helpful for early-career staff at the University of Westminster. The majority of survey respondents felt the scheme was a good match for, or exceeded, their expectations and there was a strong appetite for the mentoring circles to continue with 93% mentee and 100% mentor respondents stating that they would be interested to continue in the scheme in future years.

“Please don't discontinue! For the first time since I've been at UoW, I feel that someone is interested in my research. I've been in a research desert until the last 12 months. This is one way to harness and encourage research. If there is no supportive departmental culture these mentoring circles are vital.”

8. Recommendations

In response to the issues identified in the scheme evaluation and the suggestions from participants, some recommendations are presented below for consideration by the University of Westminster if continuing to offer mentoring circles and other ECR initiatives in the future.

To address barriers to attendance

Future schemes should include the steps taken for this scheme to encourage attendance (summarised in section 3) and in addition, could:

- (i) Involve Heads of School and/or other school leads as appropriate in scheme dissemination/communications to reassure prospective participants that mentoring participation is encouraged by their managers.
- (ii) For in-person meetings, include an option for participants to join the meeting online if they are not able to travel to join in-person.
- (iii) Keep registers of attendance at mentoring sessions and follow up with non-attendees to address any perceived barriers at an early stage and encourage future participation.
- (iv) Consider mechanisms for recognising participation in mentoring activities (as mentor/mentee) in University workload models.

To manage participant expectations

- (v) Consider making attendance (in-person or online) at the mentee briefing session a requirement for joining a mentoring circle group.
- (vi) Have a dedicated webpage for the mentoring circle scheme to provide information for prospective mentees.
- (vii) Film some short 'talking heads' videos to include in scheme communications/website of previous mentees and mentors discussing what to expect and the benefits of the scheme.
- (viii) Provide mentors/mentees with a 'discussion framework' to support them in their first session to establish the group's mutual expectations and iron out any misconceptions in the first meeting.

To support the mentoring experience

- (ix) If sessions are online, encourage all participants to make use of video wherever possible to maintain visual connections.
- (x) Develop an online 'resource bank' of activities/questions/information around the core discussion topics that mentors and participants can use to provide additional support and structure for their mentoring sessions (e.g. for use before, during or between sessions).
- (xi) Consider alternative options for structuring the groups – (e.g. campus location, subject or topic interests)
- (xii) Explore options to provide some 1:1 mentoring/coaching opportunities for early-career staff to complement the group mentoring initiative.

To support early-career staff development

- (xiii) Provide some practical training workshops, retreats and/or online resources for core topics relating to research and ECR issues to provide the opportunity for hands-on practice and feedback that is beyond the scope of the mentoring scheme.
- (xiv) Explore the feasibility of the suggestions for additional support for early-career staff development provided by the scheme participants (section 6.3).

Appendix 1 – Mentoring Groups Schedules and Discussion Topics

COLLEGE: Westminster Business School		
Mentor: Prof Alan Pilkington Mentor: Prod David Barnes	Proposed Session Dates/Times (session duration 2 hours)	Proposed meeting discussion theme (these may change when you discuss and agree on themes with your mentee group in 1st session)
Session 1	Thurs 6 th Feb 2020 2 to 4pm	Researching in a teaching intensive institution
Session 2	Thurs 12 th March 2020 2 to 4pm	Getting published
Session 3	Wed 22 nd April 2020 2 to 4pm (Online)	Networking: Making use of conferences and other opportunities
Session 4	Wed 10 th June 2020 2 to 4pm (online)	Progression and promotion
COLLEGE: LAS		
Mentor: Louise Sylvester Mentor: Naomi Creutzfeldt	Proposed Session Dates/Times (session duration 2 hours)	Proposed meeting discussion theme (these may change when you discuss and agree on themes with your mentee group in 1st session)
Session 1	Wed 1pm-3pm 29 th Jan	Being Strategic and/or workplace cultures
Session 2	Wed 1pm-3pm 19 th Feb	Networking and engaging with professional opportunities.
Session 3	Wed 1pm-3pm 15 th April (Online)	Successful bidding and effective collaborations.
Session 4	Wed 1pm-3pm 24 th June (Online)	Work-life balance, balancing research and teaching.
COLLEGE: DCDI		
Mentor: May Adadol Ingawani Mentor: Tamas Kiss	Proposed Session Dates/Times (session duration 2 hours)	Proposed meeting discussion theme (these may change when you discuss and agree on themes with your mentee group in 1st session)
Session 1	Wednesday, 5th February, 13.00	Setting professional goals/Career Planning/Progression and promotion
Session 2	Wednesday, 20th May, 13.00 (online)	Making grant applications/Getting published/Managing rejection
Session 3	Wednesday, 10th June, 13.00 (online)	Balancing teaching and research with health and wellbeing
Session 4	Wednesday, 24th June, 13.00 (Online)	Networking/Effective (cross-disciplinary) collaborations/Making use of conferences