JPR
Journal of Pedagogical Research

Research Article

Peer mentors' experiences and perceptions of mentoring in undergraduate health and sports science programmes

Earle Derek Abrahamson[1], Claire Puzzar[2], Melissa S. Ferro[3] and Sarah Bailey[4]

[1]*University of East London, UK (ORCID: 0000-0002-1341-6107)*
[2]*University of East London, UK (ORCID: 0000-0002-5822-7369)*
[3]*Kaplan International College of London, UK (ORCID: 0000-0003-2609-8061)*
[4]*London School of Business and Management, UK (ORCID: 0000-0003-3663-5676)*

Peer mentoring schemes are increasingly visible within professional practice, and in recent years, universities have integrated mentoring across undergraduate programmes. In order to provide the appropriate support to peer mentors and contribute to the future development and success of peer-mentoring schemes, it is necessary to investigate not only the benefits afforded to mentees, but also peer mentors' perceptions of their experiences. This small-scale qualitative study was conducted with participants who were recruited from the peer-mentoring scheme across two professional undergraduate health programmes: Podiatry and Sports Therapy. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the early experiences and expectations of being a mentor, mentorship activities, reasons and personal narratives for becoming a mentor, and the effectiveness of the training they received. Findings suggest that constructive and destructive friction exist between how mentors perceive their mentorship role and the strategies and skills they develop and use during their mentorship experiences. The study concludes with recommendations for new mentors and implementation of mentorship schemes within the widening population context of higher education.

Keywords: Peer mentoring; Expectations; Mentoring experiences; Professional health programmes

Article History: Submitted 1 April 2019; Revised 25 July 2019; Published online 8 August 2019

1. Introduction

In recent years, peer-mentoring programmes have been embedded into undergraduate courses to support first year students at the start of their academic life (Bayer, Grossman & Dubois, 2015; Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh &Wilss, 2008). With the ever-changing student demographics, which include increased populations of racial and ethnic minority students as well as mature students, who have been out of education for a number of years, it is important that support mechanisms are implemented early to ensure a sense of belonging within the university environment (Glaser, Hall & Halperin, 2006). Those who feel they do not fit in, have difficulty settling at university (Kane, Chalcraft & Volpe, 2014; Christie, Munro & Fisher, 2004). According to Heirdsfield et al. (2008), students may experience feelings of isolation and uncertainty in making the complex transition to

---

higher education environments. These transitions often require a degree of independence and autonomy, coupled with a practical understanding of educational technologies and the ability to balance academic workload with external commitments such as family life. This has significant implications for progression to the second year and successful completion of the degree programme. Peer mentoring is one intervention, which if designed and administered effectively, can bridge the gap between the feeling of wanting to leave and the sense of belonging to a new higher education culture (Heirdsfield, et al., 2008). Whilst the majority of research on peer mentoring has examined the impact of mentoring programmes on mentors and mentees alike, there appears to be limited research that has fully explored how mentors perceive their role and experiences during mentoring. The present small-scale study investigated the experiences of student mentors in two mentorship programmes that took place at the University of East London (UEL), School of Health, Sports and Bioscience.

1.1. Litrerature Review

The theoretical framework for this study includes the context of UK higher education, the literature on peer mentoring programmes, and peer mentorship within the field of health sciences. It also involves relevant learning theories as they relate to peer mentorship schemes, keeping in mind that learning occurs not only with the mentees, but also the mentors. It culminates with the research questions the study sought to answer.

1.1.1. The UK and UEL context

Prior to the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992, the vast majority of undergraduate students entered a UK university after 1-3 years of coursework (in specific fields of study) at a sixth form school/college that prepared them for a series of standardized exams called A-Levels. Before 1992, alternatives to university study included, but were not limited to, obtaining vocational/trade certifications from a polytechnic institute or other BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council) college. In response to the call to increase the enrolments of students between 18-30 years of age, the UK Parliament passed legislation that converted most polytechnics in England and Wales to what are known as "modern" or "post-1992" universities (Archer, 2007). The idea was towidenparticipation to populations of students who were more likely to attend a local polytechnic earning work-related qualifications than spend their limited resourcestudying for the A-Levels (Archer, 2007; Christie, Cree, Mullins, & Tett, 2018). Although, higher education experiences are considered to transform lives and improve society by developing engaged citizens who make a valuable contribution to a nation's wellbeing, Brabon (2017) explains that the uneven nature of access to higher education is a primary inhibitor. Many of these post 1992 universities recruit students from their local neighborhoods and accept a wide variety of qualifications in addition to traditional A-level exam scores (Archer, 2007).

UEL was a polytechnic institute with roots in the County Borough of West that extend back to 1892. Now a part of the London Borough of Newham, UEL is comprised of three campuses: Stratford, University Square, and Docklands and seeks to serve the higher educational needs of these culturally diverse East London communities. From 2015-2018, it has had a consistent undergraduate student enrolment of approximately 12,000 students with "the largest percentage of students of any full-range London university coming from areas of multiple deprivation and from BAME (Black, Asian, and minority ethnic) backgrounds" (UEL Annual Report and Financial Statements, 2018, p, 8).At UEL, addressing progression and completion rates includes developing, implementing, and monitoring interventions and support services that address retention and progression rates during the first year of undergraduate study. Many of these interventions relate to student engagement and their ability to overcome academic and personal obstacles. Student engagement particularly within a UK context is one of the primary impact metrics used to assess the quality of higher education provision.

University accountability for the success of its students in relation to widening participation and social mobility has been a topic of interest in recent UK government agency reports.

Specifically, thesharp increase in diverse student populations and the provision of relevant support services was a topic of interest in a 2017 report by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). HEFCE noted a disparity in UK Higher Education in terms of teaching quality and student support, and factors such as widening participation, inclusion and social mobility. In other words, previously marginalized and excluded populations had gained access to a university degree, but support for overcoming obstacles, including a sense of belonging and a sense that academic success was achievable, lagged behind. The student transitions literature advocates that institutions encourage belonging so students can feel part of the university community and become accustomed to the university culture (Chow & Healey, 2008; Kane, Chalcraft & Volpe, 2014). Students' connectedness to the university and their identity of 'being a student' has the potential to impact their commitment to studying and development as learners (Scanlon, Rowling & Weber 2007). Thus it is accepted that students' perceptions of how welcoming a university is, can have a significant impact on their perceptions of their learning experiences (Hamshire, Willgoss & Wibberley, 2013) and their 'will to learn' (Gilles & Wilson, 2004).

As a result of the 2017 HEFCE report, universities have been tasked by various UK government agencies to extend support and outreach initiatives in order to improve and report onstudentprogression and retention rates in light oftheir negative effects on social mobility. UEL has established several support mechanisms and interventions at an institutional level (shared across the three campuses) and in response to individual programme needs. This research was conducted with volunteer mentors who were part of a mentorship scheme in two programmes: Podiatry and Sports Therapy.

1.1.2. Peer mentoring

Peer mentoring programmes can be developed and structured in multiple ways, but to be effective certain characteristics need to be implemented. These include the mentor, and mentor selection process, the size of the mentoring group, a mentorship programmeco-ordinator, and flexibility in delivering the programme (Rolfe-Flett, 2000). Peer mentorship schemes usually involve 2nd and 3rd year students who act as mentors to first year students in order to offer support and guidance through the many challenges of the first-year experience (Keller, 2005). In their simplest form, peer mentors play a pastoral role to facilitate the transition into higher education but do not directly help with academic work. Instead, the mentor introduces the mentee to various academic support services, offers support through sharing their own experiences and provides on-going encouragement. In general, mentors contact their mentees to schedule weekly face-to-face meetings in relaxed settings, such as a coffee shop or student lounge. In their more complex forms, peer mentorship programmesmay involve small groups of mentees who are assigned a mentor. In this group-mentoring format, the mentor provides revision sessions after a lecture, lab, or seminar. These sessions are used to reinforce learning content, building confidence, increasing motivation, and developing self-efficacy.

McInnis, James, and Hartley (2000) advocate that peer support through mentoring programmes are preferable as they appear to be more effective support strategies during the firstyear transition. According to Heirdsfield et al. (2008) and Glaser et.al. (2006), peer mentoring does not only provide academic support, but further serves to encourage social inclusion and integration. Drew et al. (2000) found that students often feel more comfortable seeking advice from fellow students especially in the first year. This could, partially, be due to having a reluctance to question or approach an academic staff, or not being able to relate to an academic staff member. Pursuant to this, Drew et al., (2000) suggests that a mentor/mentee relationship could be enhanced by matching mentors with mentees on similar demographics and experiences.

1.1.3. Peer mentoring in health sciences

Mentoring programmes are not just confined to higher education; within professional practice, mentoring schemes are used to provide staff with support and assistance as well as encouraging

professional development within a workforce. Over the years mentoring has received recognition within nursing and midwifery and more recently within allied health practice. In the UK, mentorship can assist with change and help with reducing stress in the medical workforce of the National Health Service (MacLeod & Conway, 2007). It is thought that such schemes benefit not only the mentor and mentee but also the patient (Dancer, 2003). With this in mind it is imperative to provide healthcare students with the opportunity to engage in the mentoring process during their undergraduate studies. This in turn will provide an opportunity to develop transferrable skills, which enhances employment opportunities and also supports new graduates in their roles as healthcare professionals. This is supported by prior research that suggests that peer mentoring benefits both mentors and mentees by enabling the development of transferable skills (Fox & Stevenson, 2006). Potter (1997) found that mentors often develop a deeper understanding of subject matter as a result of engaging with a mentee. A key skill associated with mentorship benefits is the ability of the mentor to develop confidence in their communication with a mentee and assume a leadership role within the mentor/mentee relationship. This is important in a healthcare setting, where understanding clinical expectations, that include leading teams, is paramount. Employers require that recent graduates have the ability to apply the theories and procedures they have learned in their coursework whilst demonstrating a wide range of soft skills. To respond to these employment exigencies, particularly in the health sciences, the design and delivery of curricula have had to change.

1.1.4. Relevant learning theories

A shared goal by students and universities alike is to provide learners with opportunities to acquire sound knowledge of a given discipline and to develop a set of professional skills and dispositions that are valued by the field and are necessary for securing graduate employment. To do so, many educational institutions are changing the way they deliver content, from traditional large lectures towards an emphasis on learner-centered pedagogies that actively engage students in social learning contexts. Social constructivism as described by Vygotsky (1979), emphasizes the social and personal context for learning and learning development. In considering the tenets of the social constructivist framework and exploring the dynamics of the zone of proximal development, it is evident that an individual can enhance cognitive levels by learning with, and from, a more experienced, capable peer. Falchikov (2001), used the term "expert scaffolding" to denote how working with a more experienced peer can facilitate greater cognitive development, through progressive appreciation of how a skill is taught and learned. This aligns with the pillars of social constructivism and positions the social environment as central to aiding learning development. This view is supported in the work of Pitkethly and Posser (2001) who argue that the social environments and adjustment to social issues is the key to success in learning. Failing to adjust to social environmental issues,in addition to the experience of intellectual difficulties, is a significant barrier to progression within a higher education context.

Successful learners must also develop their abilities to overcome these barriers through self-regulation and meta-cognition. Beattie (2000) posits that mentoring enables students to co-construct meaning and adopt a self-regulatory approach to learning. Ten, Cate, Snell, Mann, and Vermunt (2004) elucidate that learning, according to a self-regulatory model, involves an inter-play between three learning-process components: cognitive (what to learn), affective (why to learn), and meta-cognitive (how to learn). Support mechanisms for learning and development must address all three components. Both affective and regulative learning activities lead indirectly to learning outcomes, due to the influence on processing subject specific learning material. Self-regulation, according to Vermunt and Verloop (1999) has two important conceptualisationsat two different levels of specificity: (1) metacognitive learning, (2) cognitive and affective, which is the more general student-regulation of learning processes. Pursuant to this, the learning activities that students wish to engage are largely determined by the quality of the learning outcomes they attain. To fully engage with a self-regulatory learning model, a delicate balance between guided and self-

regulation must be maintained. However, teaching strategies with aims to guide learners and the preferred learning strategies of students are not always compatible. Between students' self-regulation and teachers' external regulation of learning processes, complex interplays may take place. Congruence occurs when students' learning strategies and teachers' teaching strategies are compatible. Friction occurs when this is not the case. Vermunt and Verloop (1999) referred to this balance as constructive friction, with the amount of support required varying between different students learning needs.

Friction as a concept is widely used in mathematics and science to show how two or more objects exist or learn to co-exist. Friction is not necessarily a negative termbut is better understood as a driver for change. In the context of learning, friction is useful to encourage students to seek out, and employ problem-solving skills. Higher Education programmes generally require students to become responsible, self-regulated and autonomous in their abilities to successfully complete the programme of study. Constructive friction may present a challenge for students who are trying to increase their skills in a particular learning or thinking strategy. However, this friction is considered a necessary component as itcan facilitate students' willingness to changeand develop skills in the use of learning and thinking activitiesthey are not inclined to use on their own. Vermunt and Verloop (1999) further argue that self-regulation and constructive friction develop along a continuum of mastery from students' lack of understanding and insufficient mastery of a skill to being able to use skills and knowledge independently and spontaneously. Yet, for some students achieving the balance (constructive friction) between self-regulation and guidance in learning remains a challenge (Ten, et al., 2004).

These perspectives on teaching and learning add weight to how peer-mentoring schemes can support and enhance not only transitions into Higher Education, butalso (and possibly more importantly) the social issues that encompass the Higher Education experience for many students. Similar to the constructive friction that learners experience as they work with their teachers to recognise what, why and how to learn, mentors may have to learn how to manage and navigate the constructive friction between personal objectives, goals, and commitmentsin order to support the objectives they share with their mentees.

With these relevant learning theories, the benefits of peer-mentoring schemes, and the current context of higher education in the UK in mind, this research sought to address the following questions through identification and coding of concurrent sub-themes:

1. How do peer mentors perceive their roles within the mentorship scheme?
2. What challenges do peer mentors encounter and how do they overcome these challenges?
3. How effective is the training mentors receive?

1.1.5. The peer mentorship scheme at UEL

The peer-mentoring scheme at the University of East London (UEL) was introduced into the Health, Sports and Biosciences Undergraduate Programmes in September 2013, beginning with Podiatry and later extending to the Sports Therapy Programme, where first author of this article has been a lecturer for 7 years. The UEL scheme is divided into two key schemes: 1) peer and 2) Peer Assisted Student Support (PASS) mentoring. The first involves a pastoral facilitative mentoring approach where mentors meet with their mentees regularly to offer support and encouragement. Mentors can choose to meet the mentees individually or within small groups of 4-5 mentees. The second requires the mentor to deliver a small revision session to a group of mentees following a lecture or academic activity. This study focusses on both types of group mentorship schemes.

Students who expressed an interest in peer mentoring were invited to attend a training session. The session was led by the peer mentoring scheme co-ordinator, who was a non-academic member of staff, and was used to elicit information from the attendees about their experiences and

expectation of mentoring whilst simultaneously explaining the roles and responsibilities of the mentors. The training differentiated acceptable and unacceptable behaviours and communication. Embedded into the training was a clear framework for reflective practice and noting of experience. Mentees received similar training so that expectations could be matched and managed. Mentors had access to an on-line portal wherein they could record their meetings and document issues arising. The Sport Therapy & Podiatry academic leads for the peer-mentoring scheme were able to access the portal and review the documents. This was important in terms of directing and supporting mentors through the scheme and mentoring process, as well as signposting developmental opportunities such as workshops and seminars to address deficits in the scheme's objectives. The scheme commenced within the first academic teaching week, as it was important to ensure that peer support was available at the start of the academic year. All mentors were asked to avail their time for an hour. Mentees were matched as best as possible with mentors. The matching criteria were: gender, culture, age, and socio-economic factors.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

This small-scale study used a qualitative design. A purposive sample of 12 participants was recruited across two professional health programmes: Podiatry and Sports Therapy. All 12 participants had previous experience of mentorship as first year mentees. Table 1 provides an overview of their age, gender, year of study and type of mentoring scheme.

Table 1.
Mentor Demographics

	Sports Therapy	**Podiatry**
Number of participants	6	6
Average age (age range)	25 years old (19 – 35)	30 years old (23 – 44)
Gender Female	3	5
Gender Male	3	1
Year of study		
Level 5	4	6
Level 6	2	0
Type of mentoring		
PASS leader & peer mentor	5	2
Peer mentor	1	4

2.2. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were designed to explore the early experiences and expectations of being a mentor, mentorship activities, personal narratives for becoming a mentor and training received. During the semi-structured interviews, held at two critical points within the academic year, namely the start of the year and midway through the second semester, participants were asked to describe their mentorship experiences by reflecting upon their opportunities and obstacles.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted concurrently with interviews as the analysis of interview transcripts informed the revision of questions and enabled the researchers to refine the question stems (Charmaz, 2003). Grounded theory and thematic coding (Gibbs, 2007) were used to explore links between themes by relating responses back to theoretical perspectives. The research team also used a form of template analysis as they coded transcripts. King (2004) describes template analysis as a set of techniques for thematically organizing data. Some of the themes can be a priori though

modified and interpreted by the researchers. Data were coded independently and then discussed during meetings to share interpretations, reflect on the process, and develop the emerging themes further. To address issues of validity, member checks were conducted by asking the participants to review the transcripts for accuracy.

3. Results

Pursuant to the data analysis techniques described above, the richness of the mentors' responses made it possible to examine clusters of patterns and assign specific tags to better describe and conceptualise their narratives. The researchers coded and tagged each response to identify primary themes. This resulted in five primary themes that emerged through the process and related to the research questions concerning, perceptions of being a mentor, challenges of mentorship and training:

- Becoming a mentor
- Belonging and connecting
- Alignment of relationships
- Benefits and boundaries
- Navigating challenges

Figure 1 and 2 illustrate the theme classifications between the two programmes (Podiatry and Sports Therapy) and by gender.

It is interesting and evident, that the sports therapy mentors aligned the group mentoring experience as one of navigating challenges, belonging and connecting and wanting to become a mentor. In contrast the podiatry mentors saw a greater affiliation towards aligning relationships and weighing up benefits and barriers. In terms of gender specific differences, the sports therapy male group, rated highest on 3 of the 5 categories, with benefits and barriers significantly higher than the other groups.
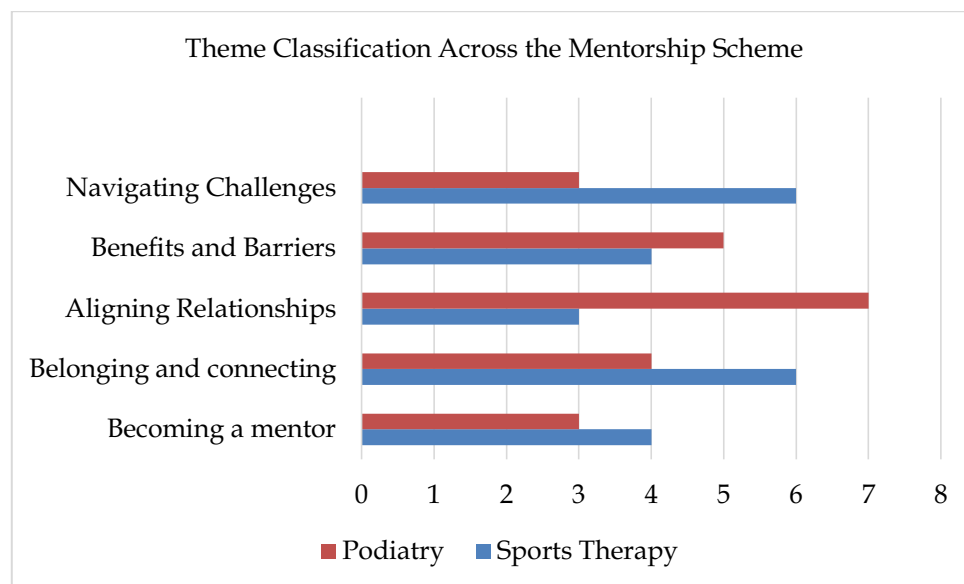

Figure 1. Theme classification between Podiatry and Sports Therapy Mentors

Further analysis resulted in collapsing two of the themes, Benefits and Barriers and Navigating Challenges into one Benefit and Challenges. In the following sections, the supporting evidence for each of the four themes is provided.
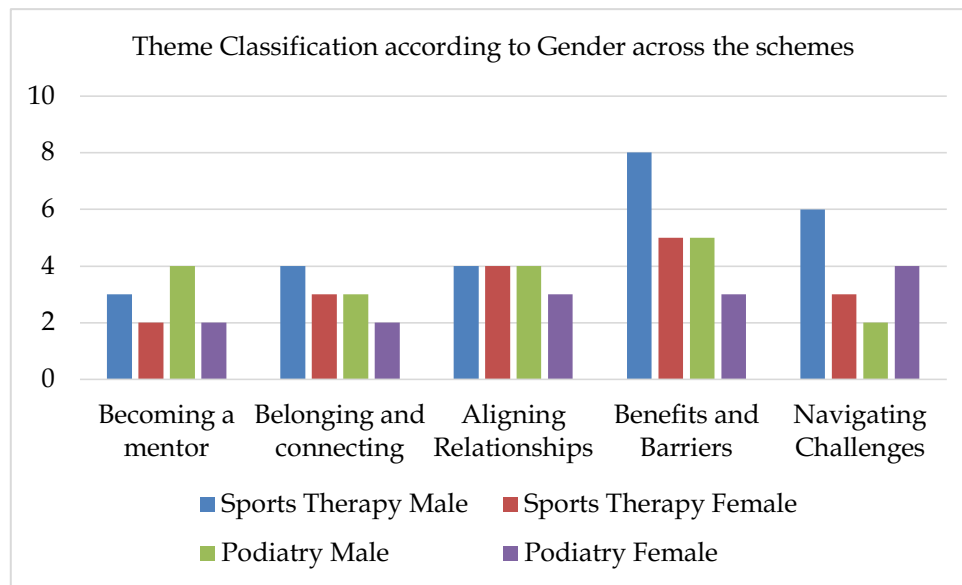
Figure 2. Gender differences across themes between the two mentor cohorts.

3.1. Perception of being a Mentor

3.1.1. Becoming a Mentor

The first theme to emerge from the data was related to reasons for becoming a mentor. One expected finding was that the participants' reasons for becoming a mentor related to their professional goals. One participant described himself as wanting to become a mentor because "it will look good" on his CV. It is interesting that the majority of the participants were positive about becoming a mentor and the impact of their mentorship on their mentees development and academic experience.

Many of the participants explained that becoming a mentor was born out of a desire to support and help other students often arising from being mentored in the first year.

> "I found being a mentee last year really useful especially in terms of knowing what was coming up and what to expect. Understanding expectations from the lecturers and also helping me prepare for exams and placement. Just getting that advice from someone who has been through it already and that they are approachable as well".

As healthcare students there was evidence that some participants saw the mentoring experienceat universitysimilar to the practitioner-patient mentoring relationship.

> "Since treating patients as a student podiatrist I have realised I am the patient's mentor. Explaining to the patient in simple terms their treatment options, and trying to motivate them to do the treatment interventions we provide, is how I would want a mentor to speak to me so that I can understand things and feel motivated. I think being a mentor will help me interact and understand patients better''

The mentors also noted that being a mentor is controversial, as support does not equate to teaching or imposingone's personal goals on the mentee.

> "I find myself often frustrated as I set goals for my mentee, arrange meetings, try and support him the best I can, but have now realised I can't impose my will on another person, as we are not the same. I struggle, at times, to confine my role to supporting and not teaching my mentee. I just want to share my experience and help him understand the expectations necessary for success at university".

Participating in the mentorship scheme profoundly changed the way some mentors think about mentorship, a sentiment other mentorsshared (Keller, 2005). One participant speculated that mentorship could be problematic and troublesome,alluding toa conflict between their experiences and expectations. This dissonance was evident in another participant'scomments about the anxiety of becoming a mentor.

> "I am not sure my mentee is ready for me and I for her, will I be able to cope with emotional overload?"

Some of the participants were troubled by not being able to effectively fulfill the remit of being a mentor and having to disband their mentorship experience. For example, one participant described his experience as a bridge into the unknown, "*no-one can truly know how you feel until you are too far gone within the journey and decide it is time to leave*". This view was shared by other mentors who claimed that investing too much time and energy could negatively impact their own study and attainment. Whilst others suggested that too much involvement could be detrimental to their health and future aspirations.

3.2. Challenges of Mentorship

3.2.1. Belonging and Connecting

The second most prevalent theme to emerge was belonging and connecting. It was difficult to isolate this theme as it tended to permeate the experiences of the participants as a whole. Some mentors tended to feel a sense of connection with their mentees, whilst others felt distant and found it difficult to communicate and interact with their mentees. One mentor described their realisation that their mentee did not fully engage with the process and there was a tangible disconnect between roles of mentor and mentee. This led to heightened tension in the relationship and a sense of isolation. Consequently the mentor decided to leave the scheme, citing a loss of self-worth and disempowerment in positively influencing their mentees. These sentiments were partially observed in other participants who questioned the purpose of the experience in terms of expectations.

> "*I became a mentor as I wanted to connect with students to encourage them to study hard and plan work early. I have realised that not everyone has my expectations and sometimes feel annoyed that my mentees are not working efficiently*"

The ability of the mentors to connect with their mentees in order to support their developmentof a sense of belonging within the culture of higher education varied. This was at times attributed to differences in age of cultural background. Even though mentees were matched to mentors with similar socio-cultural backgrounds, most of the mentors attributed a high investment in personal time to support their mentee, describing conflicts in sociocultural and maturational domains. One participant, a mature female playing multiple roles of being a mother, wife, student, health professional explained her predicament of not fully understanding her mentees background and not sure whether the mentee appreciated her background.

> "*It is difficult to understand if my mentees understand me as a student, or see me as part of the teaching staff. I come from a cultural where education is highly valued. There is simply no time for messing around. When I see my mentees not fully engaged in the mentorship process it annoys me*".

This mentor was proud of her influence on her mentees but questioned whether an informal assignment of mentor to mentee would be more beneficial to the working relationship. This was supported by other mentors who spoke of differences between their personal life and the life of their mentees. The dynamics of formal versus informal assignment of mentors to mentees is explored, in part by, Sambunjak, Straus &Marusic (2010). There appeared to be unexplored cultural differences that had the potential to either impede of enhance the mentor-mentee relationship.

When exploring culture and social enterprise as a sub theme, there were interesting dynamics within the mentor group. Some mentors explained their experience as learning to motivate and accommodate their mentees' needs as well as staying focused and motivated. They said things like:

> *"I've actually enjoyed it but I've found it harder than what I was expecting. I think the two people I am mentoring come from a similar background to me and they are mature students and they are on the ball in terms of how to access the university services but what I found difficult was that the sessions making them useful to them because they were so on the ball. There big issue was time management and managing their studies around, having children so I found the first two sessions we were going over the same things. I wanted to feel like there was a point to the sessions and they weren't just coming to the session because they were arranged. So how to motivate!"*

Creating meaningful sessions was sometimes problematic because it required an alignment of conflicting expectations and goals across cultures and generations (i.e. age). Several mentors identified a lack of congruence between their expectations and experienceswith the role. This dissonance b"etween competing demands in higher education mentorship schemes is not unusual as there is frequentlya disparity between expectations and actions and possible emerging conflicts between mentor and mentee. Nevertheless, these findings indicate areas of concern for implementing successful mentorship schemes.

On closer examination of the coded transcripts, it is possible that these competing valuesbetween being a mentor and mentee are the true value of the scheme, enabling both mentor and mentee to accommodate new experiences and work towards the development of skills that they may not otherwise have developed or used on their own. One participant described the value of mentorship by reflecting on the development of her interpersonal communication skills.

> *"My communication skills have improved as I really have to dig with my peer mentees to find out if there's anything bothering them. They are the kind of people who will just get on with it. Then it gets close to exams and they panic and then they send a message saying please help. I really have to dig to find out how they are doing and helping them belong"*

From this evidence, mentorship appears to be a paradigm of connecting and disconnecting and enabling self-growth through mutual respect.It is a dynamic relationship where the mentor is focused on making connections with the mentee, who is seeking a connection and sense of belongingness and academic success at the university. Each is navigating their own constructive friction between their expectations and the realities of the roles they are tasked to fill and relationships with which they find themselves. It is evident that through these mentorship schemes,both mentor and mentee learn to grow individually and collectively, by reflecting on personal objectives, growth, and outcomes. This culminates in a network to establish communities of practice, where relationships exist in varying states of friction and alignment.

3.3. Aligning Relationships

Through the interviews, it became apparent that successful mentor experiences rested on positive interactions with their mentees. The role of being a mentor was played out in terms of how mentors work to plan their group mentor sessions. When exploring how mentors developed their mentee sessions, a few participants spoke of having established a clear structure with their mentees.

> *"Most of the time I like to structure my sessions. I will email them and tell them we are mostly going to focus on like OSCE preparation or something"*

Others placed responsibility for arranging sessions on their mentees.

> *"I've sort of left them to it, to be fair I felt that if they needed me they could always email me or call me".*

Closer examination of these findings indicated a clear difference between mentors within and between the two health programmes. The podiatry mentors tended to rely more on structure and coordinated sessions, whereas their sports therapy counterparts used a more informal approach to arranging and monitoring sessions.

The initial interactions between mentor and mentee in the early stages of the scheme indicated differences in how the mentors felt their mentees viewed them. For example, it was clear in a mentor's comments that she cared about how others saw and responded to her.

> *"Being a mentor is a challenge, it involves careful planning and thinking about how my mentees perceive and understand me."*

It was clear that being an effective mentor was also based upon personal experiences as a former mentee.

> *"I wanted to be a mentor so that I could give my mentee a better experience than I experienced with my mentor".*

The alignment of relationships between mentor and mentee is complicated. As one participant suggested, mentorship is a two-way process and both parties need to benefit from the relationship. However, this two-way process often pushed the mentors to think and act differently than they had previously anticipated.

Several mentors described how participation in the mentorship scheme caused paradigm shifts in relationships and often promoted creative thinking to resolve complex issues. Closer analysis of the interview transcripts found that 32% of the mentors reported how engagement with mentees enabled them to rethink their role as mentors. This led to a positive shift towards focusing on asking their mentees different questions to facilitate self-regulation and not merely providing them with the answers. At times, this was a source of additional friction between what the mentor perceived as their role and the reality of the interactions they shared with their mentees.

One participant noted:

> *"I am often caught between what I know I can do to help my mentees and what I am expected to do as part of a scheme. The scheme may be a barrier to enhancing the mentor-mentee relationship. I think the scheme needs to be more flexible and give the mentor greater power in supporting the mentee through their studies"*

In this circumstance it appears that the mentor is questioning the remit of the mentor and is doubtful, or perhaps less confident about the expected relationship between mentor and mentee. In some cases, mentors relied on the training they received to address this area of friction between expectations and realities.

> *"Through the training I realised I am part of a bigger support structure and need to understand that I am merely a critical friend, facilitator, and I guess a more experienced student. In this light I am geared to offer advice and support but nothing more. If things get too intense I need to refer my mentee to the support Hub"*

The thread of friction is inherent in the mentor-mentee relationships and explicit in mentor comments, which appear to describe the relationship as troublesome. One mentor reported such conflict as an inability to fit into her mentees world.

> *"I struggle at times to fit into my mentees worlds. I do not share the same experiences and worry that my mentees do not fully understand my journey"*

The mentor-mentee spectrum of relationships may not necessarily change how schemes are developed, but do certainly change perceptions between what a mentor and mentee become.

3.4. Benefits and Barriers - Navigating Challenges

Despite the varying alignment in mentor-mentee relationships, there appears to be inherent benefits in deciding to support another student's development. One participant spoke of the positive impact in helping the mentee revise her anatomy work.

> *"I think the last two sessions they have been talking about anatomy and physiology modules as they find them difficult so we have been going over some of these topics and that's gone well. It's good for me too because it goes over my kind of first year knowledge and I can see how I have developed from first year to second year. I feel reassured that I know more than I think I do and I have retained more''*

The positive academic impact involved a deeper understanding of content knowledge as well as skills and strategies. This was stated more explicitly by another participant who said

> *"By helping my mentees revise their work, I too revise my prior learning and learning to examine the subject matter more intensely. This has led to me better understanding concepts I missed the first time around."*

Others described their mentorship experiences as changing their understanding and providing effective student support and the skills necessary to successfully do so.

> *"Becoming a mentor has enabled me to facilitate learning and support student learning. Initially I wanted to teach my mentee, but learned, through constraint, that my role is pastoral and supportive. I now appreciate knowing how to support others ..... Self satisfaction, like professionalism as well. At the beginning when I approached my mentees it had to be in a formal way and emails had to be in paragraphs, you know the way I am writing. It's because we had a session with peer mentoring coordinator and the training she made it clear about how to approach them. Obviously now it's been a few weeks and bit more comfortable with them but at the beginning I had to make sure how to approach them. The age difference with one guy was different to the other so I was mindful of that''*

This mentor went on to identify the complexities of mentorship, by reflecting on their experiences as mentor and mentee, relating her mentee experience to that of her mentor's role. The mentorship experience allowed mentors to learn more about themselves, ask questions about the value of their personal contributions towards the success of the scheme, and challenge assumptions about their expectations and experiences.

Mentorship may mean different things to different individuals but what is mutually accepted is that the process is facilitative and supportive. It involves a transformation from being a student to learning to become a positive influence in another student's life. The process celebrates achievement through enhancement of the student learning experience.

Nevertheless, this dichotomy in process has the potential to create boundaries, and often isolation if not affectively managed.

> *"I feel I want to teach my mentees and find myself struggling to confine my duty to that of pastoral guidance. I feel I may be over stepping boundaries"*

Here we see the mentor wrestling with conflicting expectations, which may be self-imposed. This is in contrast to the mentor who refers to her training to better understand and appreciate her role. Another participant shares a similar experience:

> *"It is frustrating when I try and teach my mentees and they do not seem to learn or retain the information I share. I feel angry when I plan a session and noone arrives. Why can't my mentees see the value of studying hard. I see myself juggling my workload in order to support them. I tend to be giving a lot with little return. If I continue to give - my studies will suffer"*

These challenges, while significant for some of the participants, provided insight to the benefits and short-comings of the training as well as the scope of the mentorship scheme. Additionally,

they served to support other themes and the underlying thread throughout the findings of the friction that existed between mentor/mentees conflicting expectations and goals.

3.5. Training Value and Benefits

The themes are interrelated with a general understanding around the value of training. Mentors reported that the initial and continual training and support received, enabled them to better understand their roles and develop a resource network for dealing with issues and differing circumstances. The training further supported the mentor's perceptions of mentorship, the resulting expectations, the challenges and barriers to mentoring, and the understanding of developing emotional intelligence and resourcefulness.

4. Discussion

This small-scale study sought to investigate the early experiences and expectations of undergraduate peer mentors who were involved with two mentorship schemes in Health and Sports Science. Participants in this study were second and third year students in a diverse Post-1992 university located in East London. Through interviews, this research explored their mentorship activities, reasons and personal narratives for becoming a mentor, and the effectiveness of the training they received. It focused on answering three research questions by analysing data collected at the beginning and mid-point of the academic year. The findings from this study connect to the literature on widening participation in higher education, the research on peer mentorship and learning theories that involve constructive friction as a catalyst for developing skills and strategies that are valued by employers. The findings organized under the three main research questions and divided into sub-themes serve to provide greater insight into peer learning schemes and development.

The first research question is concerned with how the mentors perceived their roles within the mentorship scheme. The findings suggest that while some mentors joined the scheme to enhance their curricula vitae, several indicated the desire to provide new students in their programmes with what they believe is the necessary support and guidance for navigating the exigencies of being a first-year student. Because the mentors in this scheme are former mentees, they perceived their role as essential to helping others achieve a sense of belongingness and academic success, even when it meant being a different kind of mentor than what they had experienced. This understanding of the importance of their mentorship roles during the first year of university study is supported by prior research (Chow & Healey, 2008; Kane, Chalcraft & Volpe, 2014; Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007), that found a first-year student's ability to connect to the university by developing their own sense of identity and membership in the campus community has the potential to affect their overall academic success. The mentors in this study reflected upon their own experiences as mentees, both positive and negative, and the needto facilitate a successful transition to university study. For widening participation first-year students, this can be a significant and challenging process fraught with feelings of isolation and uncertainty (Heirdsfield et al., 2008).

The data also showed that there was often a conflict, or friction between the mentors' perceived roles and their interactional experiences with their mentees. In some cases this friction lead to personal growth and learning, in areas such as communication, beyond what they may have been able to develop and use on their own. In other circumstances, the dissonance between the mentors' expectations and the realities of their roles was cause for frustration that in one case, led to an early departure from the scheme. As described by Vermunt and Verloop (1999), the outcomes of friction, or the lack of congruence between an expected learning experience and the actual experience, include attaining higher development and use of skills and strategies when the friction is constructive and a decrease in the development of skills and potential growth when friction is destructive in nature.In this study, the friction between the mentors' expected rolesand the realities of being a mentor is a significant finding because the data show that some form of

friction emerged across several of the themes identified. In cases of constructive friction, the mentors noted they deepened their understanding of their coursework, increased their communication skills, or challenged their perception of what student support is and should do. However, there were also instances where destructive friction led to the mentors feeling isolated and disempowered. In one instance, it led to a mentor exiting the programme.

The second research question is related to identifying the challenges the mentors encountered and how they were able to overcome them. It became apparent that one challenge was in understanding the remit of the peer mentorship scheme itself. For one mentor in the study, the scheme was not "flexible" enough so that peer mentors can provide additional support to first-year students. For other mentors the challenge began early on in the mentorship role due to a mismatch of ages and cultures between mentees and mentors. In both cases the mentors struggled to develop a meaningful, two-way relationshipwith their mentees, noting reasons such as not having similar academic goals, personal aspirations or general values related to study ethics and communication. These findings are important considerations for the successful implementation of peer mentorship programmes in terms of whether to formally match mentees with mentors who share similar age, gender, and cultural backgrounds (Sambunjak et al, 2010) or to build additional flexibility into the delivery of peer mentorship schemes from the outset (Rolfe-Flett, 2000). For some mentors frustration related to these challenges remained throughout their experiences. One mentor openly expressed feeling undervalued, particularly when mentees did not attend a scheduled session, questioning the mentees' commitment to their own studies and academic success. In this instance, the mentor was not able to determine why mentees failed to attend planned sessions, thus limiting their own satisfaction with the programme and further developing their ownmentorship skills and strategies. Aligned with the research (Fox & Stevenson, 2006; Potter, 1997) one of the goals of these two mentorship schemes involved with this study was to enable benefits for both the mentors and mentees alike by helping them develop transferable skills that are valued in the healthcare profession. These skills included, but were not limited to, interpersonal communication, critical thinking, and problemsolving. Although the schemes in this study fell short of achieving this goal with some of the mentors, otherswere able to overcome their challenges and recognized their own personal growth through self-reflection.

It is important to remember that while the first-year mentees were transitioning towards a new identity and membership in the university community, mentors were also undergoing a transformation from being only a student to being a student and a mentor. The data showed that the mentors were acutely aware of this transition, noting thechallenges they encountered when attempting to develop trust and openness in the mentor-mentee relationship. This was particularly evident in their comments about oral and written communication strategies. Specifically, one participant acknowledged their own improved communication skills in order to "dig to find out how they [mentees] are doing and helping them belong." Another mentor recognised the need to start with more formal communication in the beginning and to be mindful of any age differences in order to communicate appropriately. The success of some of the mentors and the continued frustration by others can be explained by the work of Vermut and Verloop (1999), who note different outcomes for students who experience constructive friction during a learning activity, such as those that occurred within the mentorship role. While a few of the mentors were able to demonstrate a high degree of self-regulation and further develop and implement transferable skills without guidance from a teacher or trainer, others were only able to partially implement those skills on their own. In a few cases, the mentors in this research were not able to master a particular skill enough to benefit from the friction resulting from challenges they encountered. As peer mentorship schemes progress from initial stages, it is imperative for the tutors or coordinators to recognise that for some peer mentors, achieving a balance between self-regulation and guidance during learning activities (i.e. constructive friction during mentoring experiences), is more of a challenge and may require additional intermediary support (Ten et al., 2004).

The final research question sought to answer the effectiveness of the training the mentors received. Findings indicate that when tasked with initial interactions with their mentees, or when faced with challenging situations, the mentors relied on their training. This was particularly evident when they needed to resolve complex issues that surfaced during their work with their mentees. Being able to address immediate concerns and implement viable solutions in real-time can be challenging and stressful for peer mentors, who perceive their role as an important contribution to their mentees overall academic success. As one of the participantsnoted, the training helped set boundaries for the kind of guidance mentors were expected to give in each scheme (Peer and PASS). As a result, they had more confidence in determining how best to provide pastoral care, as well as academic support to their mentees. In post 1992 universities, where widening participation has resulted in larger populations of non-traditional, mature students, having confident, well-trained peer mentors can be critical to whether these students can successfully make the transition and progress towards graduation. The research by Drew et al. (2000) concluded that students are more likely to seek advice from a peer, especially in the first year. New students who are not able to relate to their lecturers on a more personal level are more reluctant to ask them for help. Therefore, peer mentorship schemes that operate within the same academic programme and that match mentees and mentors based on similar demographics are recommended (Drew et al, 2006; Sambunjak, et al, 2010).

6. Conclusion

Whilst the majority of research on peer mentoring has examined the impact of mentoring schemes on mentors and mentees alike, there appears to be limited research that has fully explored how students perceive their roles as peer mentors and the implications of these perceptions on their own learning and growth. This study investigated the dynamics, perceptions, and complexities inherent in understanding these concerns, challenges and expectations of mentors within a mentoring environment. Connecting with the literature on widening participation in higher education, peer mentoring, and relevant learning theories to peer mentorship schemens, the study examined important differential markers to better align mentors' experiences and expectations with mentoring impact and success.

Understanding mentors' expectations is necessary in appraising the success of a mentorship programme. Mentors often interact with new students and assist with bridging the transition gap into higher education. This interaction demands time and a commitment and if expectations are malaligned or mismanaged the consequences could be devastating for both mentor and mentee (Le Cornu, 2005). This raises important pedagogic as well as philosophical questions around mentoring relationships and embedded, as well as perceived benefits, of mentoring. It further offers critique around whether significant differentiation in mentoring training--i.e. content and application needs--should be consider against level of learning. This is supported by the idea of constructive friction (Vermunt & Verloop, 1999) that recognizes the delicate balance within the scheme between guided support and self-regulatory learning. Findings from this study support the need to embed a theoretical

perspective of learning theories relevant to mentoring into the training mentors receive. This has the potential to better prepare mentors for their roles, dispel myths about the mentorship process, support and challenge the complexities within a mentorship programme, and help mentors contribute positively to the first year learning experience.

6.1. Implications

The researchers acknowledge that this study is limited to two cohorts of mentors selected from two programmes within the same school with similar curriculum and context. They do not know whether these findings could be extrapolated to reflect a wider group mentor experience. How do mentors within an institution respond to the demands of the role and the expectations laid before

them? Future studies could take up these questions by considering the evolving higher education landscape.

References

Archer, L. (2007). Diversity, equality and higher education: a critical reflection on the abuses of equity discourse within widening participation. *Teaching in Higher Education, 12*(5), 635-653.

Bayer, A., Grossman, J. B., Dubois, D. L. (2015). Using volunteer mentors to improve the academic outcomes of underserved students: The role of relationships. *Journal of Community Psychology, 43*(4), 408-429.

Beattie, M. (2000). Narratives of professional learning: Becoming a teacher and learning to teach. *Journal of Educational Enquiry, 1*(2), 1-23.

Brabon, B. (2017). Students at the heart of the system. *Horizon scanning report; Contemporary Issues in Teaching and Learning.* Higher Education Academy, UK.

Cantwell, R. H., &Scevak, J. J. (2004). Engaging university learning: The experiences of students entering university via recognition of prior industrial experience. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 23(2), 131-145.

Charmaz, K. (2003). Grounded Theory. In J.A. Smith (ed.), *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods* (pp. 81-110). London: Sage.

Chow, K., & Healey, M. (2008). Place attachment and place identity: First-year undergraduates making the transition from home to university. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 28(4), 362-372.

Christie, H., Munro, M., & Fisher, T. (2004). Leaving university early: Exploring the difference between continuing and non-continuing students. *Studies in Higher Education*, 29(5), 617-636.

Christie, H, Cree, V. E., Mullins, E. &Tett, L. (2018). 'University opened up so many doors for me': the personal and professional development of graduates form non-traditional backgrounds. *Research in Higher Education, 43*(11), 1938-1948.

Crisp, G., & Cruz, I. (2009). Mentoring college students: A critical review of the literature between 1990 and 2007. *Research in Higher Education*, 50(6), 525-545.

Dancer, J.M. (2003). Mentoring in healthcare: theory in search of practice? *Clinician in Management, 12*(1), 21-31.

Drew, N. M., Pike, L. T., Pooley, J. A., Young, A. H. C., & Breen, L. (2000). School of psychology peer mentoring pilot program. Paper presented at the *4th PacificRim - First year in higher education Conference: Creating Futures for a New Millennium*. QUT, Brisbane, Australia.

Eby, L. T., Durley, J. R., Evans, S. C., &Ragins, B. R. (2006). The relationship between short-term mentoring benefits and long-term mentor outcomes. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 69*(3), 424-444.

Falchikov, N. (2001). *Learning Together: Peer Tutoring in Higher Education.* London: Routledge.

Fox, A., & Stevenson, L. (2006). Exploring the effectiveness of peer mentoring of accounting and finance students in higher education. *Accounting Education: An International Journal, 15*(2), 189-202.

Gibbs, G. R. (2007). *Thematic coding and categorizing. Analyzing Qualitative Data.* London: Sage.

Gilles, C., & Wilson, J. (2004). Receiving as well as giving: Mentors' perceptions of their professional development in one teacher induction program. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning, 12*(1), 88-106.

Glaser, N., Hall, R., & Halperin, S. (2006). Students supporting students: The effects of peer mentoring on the experiences of first year university students. *Journal of the Australia and New Zealand Student Services Association, 27,* 4-19.

Hamshire, C., Willgoss, T.G., &Wibberley, C. (2013). Should I stay or should I go? A study exploring why healthcare students consider leaving their programme. *Nurse Education Today, 33*(8), 889-895.

HEFCE (2017). *299 universities and colleges take part in year two of the Teaching Excellence Framework.* Report on the 27 January. Retrieved from http:/www.hefce.ac.uk/

Heirdsfield, A. M., Walker, S., Walsh, K, & Wilss, L. (2008). Peer mentoring for first year teacher education students: the mentors' experience. *Mentoring & Tutoring; Partnership in Learning, 16*(2), 109-124.

Jackling, B., & McDowall, T. (2008). Peer Mentoring in an Accounting Setting: A case study of mentor skill development. *Accounting Education: An International Journal, 17*(4), 447-462.

Kane, S., Chalcraft, D., & Volpe, G. (2014). Notions of belonging: First year, first semester higher education student enrolled on business or economics degree programmes. *International Journal of Management Education, 12*(2), 193-201.

Keller, T. E. (2005). A systemic model of the youth mentoring intervention. *Journal of Primary Prevention, 26*(2), 169–188

King, N. (2004). Using templates in the thematic analysis of text. In C.Cassell, & G. Symon (Eds.), *Essential guide to qualitative methods in organizational research* (pp. 256-270). London: Sage.

Le Cornu, R. (2005). Peer mentoring: Engaging pre-service teachers in mentoring one another. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnerships in Learning, 13*(3), 335-366.

Macleod, A.K., & Conway, C. (2007). Well-being and positive future thinking for self versus others. Cognition and Emotion. 21(5):1114-1124.

McInnis, C., James, R., & Hartley, R. (2000). *Trends in the first year experience in Australian universities.* Canberra: Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

Pitkethly, A., & Prosser, M. (2001). The first year experience project: a model for university wide change. *Higher Education Research and Development, 20*(2), 185-198.

Potter, J. (1997). New directions in student tutoring. *Education and Training, 39*(1), 24-30.

Rolfe-Flett, A. (2000). *Mentoring in Australia. Frenchs Forest.* Pearson: Australia.

Sambell, K., McDowell, L, & Montgomery, C. (2013). *Assessment for learning in higher education.* London: Routledge.

Sambunjak, D., Straus, S.E, & Marusic, A. (2010). A systematic review of qualitative research on the meaning and characteristics of mentoring in academic medicine. *Journal of General Internal Medicine, 25*(1), 72-78. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-009-1165-8

Scanlon, L., Rowling, L., & Weber, Z. (2007). 'You don't have like an identity... you are just lost in a crowd': Forming a student identity in the first-year transition to university. *Journal of Youth Studies, 10*(2), 223-241.

Ten Cate, O., Snell, L., Mann, K., &Vermunt, J. (2004). Orienting teaching towards the learning process. *Academic Medicine, 79*(3), 219-228.

University of East London (2018). *Annual report and financial statements.* Retrieved from https://www.uel.ac.uk/-/media/main/finance/121218_annual-report-2018

Vermunt, J.D., &Verloop, N. (1999). Congruence and friction between learning and teaching. *Learning Instruction, 9,* 257-280.

Vygotsky, L. (1979). *Mind in Society: The development of higher psychological processes.* M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, (Eds.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.