



# Mentoring

*Understanding why and how it works in relation  
to Project Access' Mentoring Model*

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## Executive Summary

Mentoring is simply understood as a supportive and developmental relationship between a more experienced mentor and a less experienced mentee. It can exist as both a dyadic one-to-one relationship, and as “developmental networks” (where mentoring provides access to new social networks. While Project Access’ (PA) current mentoring model fits the Dominguez’s (2012) definitional framework of mentoring, it is unclear what theories and evidence it is based on. Thus, this report serves to establish the theoretical and research understandings of mentoring in relation to PA’s mentoring programme.

Mediators (i.e. benefits) of mentoring explored include both instrumental and psychosocial reasons. Instrumental benefits of mentoring include the tangible benefits obtained from mentoring through goal-directed interactions, which include information provision, access to new/other social networks, direct application assistance, skill set development, and promoting reflection on higher education (HE) goals. Psychosocial benefits include improving mentees’ self-esteem, psychological well-being, social skills, self-efficacy, and HE aspirations. It can also mitigate “summer melt” (i.e. disadvantaged students failing HE enrolment despite receiving offers) through emotional support, improving university environment familiarity, and dispelling HE-related fears. Psychosocial support in university also can help ameliorate negative emotions caused by school transitions and increase student motivation, thereby reducing student attrition rates.

Moderators of mentoring (i.e. factors affecting mentoring’s effectiveness) include contact frequency and duration, relatability, and mentee-mentor closeness. The duration of the mentorship should be sufficiently long to enable mentees to gradually transition from a state of dependency to one of autonomy and agency, although there is no consensus on the optimal duration of mentorships more generally. Nevertheless, some studies concur that observed mentoring benefits are greatest when the relationship spans a year or longer. Contact frequency also influences the effectiveness and longevity of the mentorship, with the caveat that there is a could be a trade-off between the mentorship duration and contact frequency (e.g. increased contact frequency led to reduced mentorship duration). Good mentorship relatability that increases the mentorship quality is improved by demographic and perceived similarity. However, studies have shown mixed degrees of importance for demographic similarity, and perceived similarities are challenging to identify and initially seek out for mentors and mentees. With strong mentee-mentor closeness (fostered by empathy, authenticity, having fun etc.), the mentorship can provide better psychosocial support (e.g. emotional support, validation, social development, receptiveness to advice and guidance). This closeness also can help increase mentoring outcomes by increasing effort spent in developing the mentoring relationship.

PA’s primary data of impact measurement surveys conducted till date have supported the evidence from the literature review identified above. PA’s efforts have helped mentees

improve their knowledge about the application process (instrumental benefits) and provided encouragement to pursue university applications (psychosocial benefits). The surveys have also highlighted a positive correlation between mentor-mentee contact frequency and the Net Promoter Score (a proxy for satisfaction with PA's mentoring programme). Particularly, areas of improvement highlighted by survey respondents identified insufficient mentee-mentor contact. The mentor survey identified a general sense of dissatisfaction towards the amount of mentor training provided. In PA's context, mentorship relatability was ranked by mentees as follows (from popular to least popular): Subject, University, Nationality, and Socio-economic Background. For mentors who were not fully satisfied with their mentorship pairing, they cited relatability reasons such as mismatch of universities, courses, and/or countries.

This report has also led to a number of recommendations and improvements around mentor training, how we measure our impact, and our product.

# 1. Introduction to Mentoring

“Everyone is using it [mentoring] loosely, without precision, ... [creating] a false sense of consensus, because at a superficial level everyone ‘knows’ what mentoring is.”

(Jacobi, 1991, p. 508)

Mentoring is Project Access’ (PA) modus operandi since its inception in 2015, which has allowed the organisation to address access-related issues under widening participation in higher education (HE) and international student mobility. Although PA has a quantitative and qualitative grasp of its effectiveness (through our surveys, interviews etc.), the organisation has yet to adequately establish why (and how) mentoring works.

Therefore, the Research Team has curated this report to bridge this knowledge gap for PA. The objectives of this report are threefold. Firstly, it will help PA better understand their mentoring methods from a bottom-up process by outlining pre-existing understandings and mentoring knowledge from the field (both academic and non-academic). Secondly, this report will help PA improve its mentoring process, which can help more effectively target both mentor and mentee behaviours, attitudes, and characteristics. Lastly, it aims to provide PA with theoretical tenets to align with our practices.

The report is structured as follows. This first section will introduce definitional conceptualisations of mentoring and outline PA’s mentoring model within these definitions. It will also outline the methods used to curate the findings. The second section discusses the mediators of mentoring through outlining the instrumental and psychosocial reasons of why mentoring works. The third section focuses on the moderators (i.e. factors of effectiveness) of the mentoring relationship, specifically through understanding contact frequency and duration, relatability, and mentee-mentor closeness. The fourth section of the report will incorporate the primary data obtained from PA’s previous surveys and discuss the implications of corroborating the data with the literature findings.

## 1.1. Mentoring Definitions

Scholars in business and organisational leadership have established that there is no one universal definition of mentoring that satisfies all stakeholders involved in the mentoring process (Dominguez & Garza, 2020; Gehrke, 1988). Yet, it is a unique process that needs to be distinguished from other similar processes (e.g. learning, coaching, training, induction, socialisation, role modelling, advising etc.). Traditional mentoring can be defined as “a supportive relationship between a more experienced person (mentor) and a less experienced person (mentee) that enables the development of a trust-based relationship allowing for the needs of the mentee to be met” (Eby et al., 2008). In educational settings, specifically

academic mentoring, the support provided includes academic and/or vocational assistance from a teacher or another education-related individual (Jacobi, 1991). In the context of PA, this would entail generating a **supportive and developmental relationship** between a more experienced university student mentor and a prospective student (mentee) looking to enter HE. In PA's mentorships, the support accorded to mentees relates to academic, educational, and miscellaneous assistance typically related to HE matters (primarily applications and access to university).

It is crucial to note that the traditional mentoring definitions do not usually hold in contemporary contexts. More recently, mentoring has gone beyond a dyadic one-to-one relationship, and has been related to **"developmental networks"** (Dominguez & Garza, 2020; citing Ragins, 2007, and Mullen, 2012), where mentors are a means to access new social networks (i.e. communities). These scholars have also noted that such contemporary mentoring recognise that mentoring benefits are further expanded beyond single mentors, connoting a "new reciprocity and mutuality" across different actors while factoring the impact of technology that makes this networking possible. This notion of developmental networks mirrors PA's newest mentoring programme, where cohort-organised mentees partake in online community-centred lessons and modules in addition to receiving one-to-one mentoring support. PA's country bootcamps also build in this idea of developmental networks.

## 1.2. Qualifying PA's Mentoring Model and Dimensions

Defining PA's mentoring model is essential for subsequent impact evaluation, as it provides a research-based determination of the appropriateness of mentoring processes. Thus, it helps provide suggestible improvements and outcome evaluations. A definitional framework of mentoring from Dominguez (2012, cited by Dominguez & Garza, 2020) is borrowed to frame PA's most recent mentoring model. She identifies 5 elements that make up any mentoring definition and/or model, which are as follows:

- Qualifiers: Essence of the venture
- Defining Word: The nature of the relationship
- Participants: Those involved in the mentoring relationship
- Functions/Activity(ies): Specific tasks/processes that help foster the mentoring relationship and achieve desired outcomes
- Outcomes: Real/expected goals and objectives

PA's internal materials for mentoring (our mentor handbook, training presentations – refer to references for exact documents) can help inform (directly or inferred) the 5 elements of PA's current mentoring model, and are shown in Table 1 below.

Elements	PA's Mentoring Model
Qualifiers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safeguarding</li> <li>• Positive</li> <li>• Sharing</li> <li>• Helping</li> <li>• Friendly</li> <li>• Inquisitive</li> </ul>
Defining Word	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationship/s</li> <li>• Community</li> </ul>
Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prospective student exploring HE options</li> <li>• Experienced (student) mentor who has university experience</li> </ul>
Functions/Activity(ies)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing personal experiences</li> <li>• Dispensing personal advice</li> <li>• Providing/linking factual information</li> <li>• Giving feedback</li> </ul>
Outcomes (for mentees)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence building</li> <li>• Enhancing knowledge on application processes</li> </ul>

**Table 1.** The 5 elements of PA's mentoring model, using Dominguez's mentoring framework (2012, cited by Dominguez & Garza, 2020).

### 1.3. Bridging gaps in understanding on mentoring: Methods

Although PA's current mentoring model provides a basic understanding of the kind of outcomes mentoring can provide, it is unclear what theories and evidence it is based on. Hence, this report serves to provide theories and evidence to bridge the gaps in understanding.

The methods involved in detailing the next section on the reasons why mentoring works include a brief literature review of both academic and non-academic resources available online that discuss mentoring in any applicable context. No one theory of mentorship was prioritised over others. Where available, prior systematic/meta analyses, literature reviews, or consolidation reports, were used considering the limited volunteer hours made available for this report. Efforts were specifically directed to sources discussing mentoring more generally or youth mentoring, since they are most applicable to PA, as opposed to mentoring in other contexts (career mentoring etc.). Nevertheless, the final range of resources used are quite diverse.

## 2. Mediators of Mentoring

### 2.1. Instrumental Reasons

Mentoring works due to several instrumental reasons. “Instrumental” is defined as the direct tangible benefits (i.e. non-psychosocial) obtained from the mentoring relationship/process based on goal-directed interactions. Generally, this involves direct transfers of information and advice in the form of **guidance for increased awareness (primarily of opportunities) and skill set development.**

In the context of widening participation, instrumental goals of mentoring include enabling mentees to make successful applications to their dream university through enhancing their knowledge about the application processes. Thus, these tangible efforts directly contribute towards improving one’s success in the application process. These can include:

- Acquiring **informational help to directly support** their application and matriculation process (e.g. information databases/sources, studying resources, funding sources)
- Acquiring informational help about **important university timelines** (e.g. deadlines, open days)
- Acquiring informational help about **university-related cultures** (e.g. first-hand understandings about university social life, collegiate living, city/town cultures)
- Acquiring **access to new/other social links and networks** (i.e. gaining social capital)
- Acquiring **direct practical help for application purposes** (e.g. personal guidance in navigating the application process, assistance and feedback with writing personal statements, interview practice)
- **Developing skills** relevant to university (e.g. academic writing, critical reading, analysing data)
- **Reflecting** and thinking critically (being challenged etc.) about HE goals, interests, abilities, beliefs, and ideas
- **Reviewing goal progression**

More recently, if we are to consider widening participation as moving beyond the application process to encapsulate the whole university life, instrumental benefits from mentoring can extend the aforementioned benefits to also include **career-related guidance** (via informational help, resource and social access, practical help, skill set development).

This instrumental support is reflected in the success rates of youth mentoring programmes. For instance, iMentor, which has been going for 21 years, boasts a 74% college enrolment rate compared to 62% at schools they did not work with (iMentor, 2019). Academic literature corroborates these successes, with meta-analyses of mentoring programmes showing that



mentoring is associated with a wide range of favourable outcomes that include instrumental ones such as academic achievement, employment, and career development (DuBois et al., 2002, 2011; Eby et al., 2008, 2013). These favourable instrumental outcomes are statistically identified by the significant effect sizes and/or positive correlations on academic, schooling, or career outcomes. For example, mentees' perception of greater instrumental support was more strongly associated with social capital ( $r = 0.35$ ) in Eby et al.'s (2013) meta-analysis of 173 mentoring programme samples.

### **Summary**

- Instrumental reasons behind mentoring's successes is defined as the tangible benefits obtained from the mentoring relationship/process based on goal-directed interactions (e.g. guidance for increased awareness to opportunities, skill set development).
- For widening participation, this involves assisting mentees with their main goal of entering their dream university, which entails enhancing their knowledge about the application processes and their capability to do it well.
- Instrumental help includes informational provision, access to new/other social networks, direct application help, skill set development, and promote reflection about HE goals.
- Instrumental benefits also include career-related benefits if one considers the mentoring process to extend beyond the point of entry to these universities.
- Both academic literature and grey literature supports the impact mentoring has on these instrumental outcomes, evident from the statistically significant effect sizes and/or correlations between mentoring and these instrumental outcomes (e.g. academic achievement, career employment).

The next sub-section will discuss the psychosocial reasons behind why mentoring works.

## 2.2. Psychosocial Reasons

Besides instrumental reasons discussed in the previous section, there are also a number of psychosocial reasons for the success of mentoring. For example, the literature shows that peer mentoring **improves mentees' self-esteem, psychological well-being and social skills**. Theoretically, a youth's self-esteem increases when he/she receives empathy, praise and attention from idealised others within close dyadic relationships, such as a mentor-mentee relationship (Kohut, 2014). Moreover, when the idealised individual (e.g. a mentor) is perceived as consistently present and competent, the youth begins to emulate the skills of the idealised individual, thereby leading to development of social skills. Karcher (2005) examined the effects of six months of peer mentoring on middle-school youth (including low-risk and high-risk youth). In this study, the primary goal of the developmental mentoring was to increase the mentees' connectedness to school and to their parents. The psychosocial effects of the mentoring programme include an improvement in self-management, self-esteem, and social skills. These findings are echoed by a random assignment impact study that was conducted on a community-based mentoring programme – Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) School-Based Mentoring<sup>1</sup> – in 2007 (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014). The study stated that after approximately 10 months of the mentoring programme, the mentees had better emotional/psychological well-being, social relationships and attitudes towards their studies vis-à-vis their non-mentored peers. Moreover, there was an improvement in the mental health of the mentored young adults, as evident from a reduction in depression symptoms. After 13 months of mentoring, there was also an increase in the mentees' acceptance by their peers, as well as more optimistic beliefs with regard to their ability to do well in school.

The literature also shows that adult-youth mentoring programmes result in similar positive psychosocial effects. The meta-analysis of outcome studies of intergenerational, one-on-one youth mentoring programmes conducted by Raposa et al. (2019) highlights multiple positive psychosocial effects of mentoring. For instance, despite the differences in the structure and aim of adult-youth mentoring programmes, most studies highlighted the importance of these mentoring relationships in promoting positive psychosocial development, such as **preventing depression and delinquent behaviour** (DuBois & Karcher, 2013). In addition, such mentoring programmes aid mentees in **developing better interpersonal skills**. This is because the adult mentors model prosocial skills and provide a consistent and safe environment in which the mentor and mentee interact. In turn, these enhance the mentee's perceptions of social support and aid the mentee in forming positive connections with others. The adult mentors also guide the youth mentees in navigating difficulties in their relationships with others. Additionally, these mentor-mentee

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<sup>1</sup> Big Brothers Big Sisters is a community-based mentoring program which matches youths (6-18 years old), predominantly from low-income, single-parent households, with adult volunteer mentors who are typically young (20-34 years old) and well-educated (most are college graduates). In 2008, Big Brothers Big Sisters served 255,000 youths at 470 agencies nationwide.

relationships increase the youth mentee's openness to the values, guidance and viewpoints of adults (Ruzek et al., 2016). Research findings also show that the adult-youth mentoring programmes aid the youth in forming their identities, because the adult mentors serve as role models of success, and showcase traits for the youth to emulate (Sánchez et al., 2016).

In the context of widening participation, mentoring **increases mentees' HE aspirations, particularly for disadvantaged students**. A key issue is that often, the parents of disadvantaged, capable students are not university graduates. Research has shown that first-generation students tend to have lower HE aspirations as compared to non-first-generation students, and this may be explained by "students' lack of information about degrees, college progress, availability of resources and their academic preparation" (Saenz et al., 2007). Hence, in the context of widening participation, mentors play a crucial role in raising mentees' HE aspirations (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). Specifically, mentees become more interested in attending university through discussions with mentors who have attended universities themselves. Similarly, in another study involving at-risk young adults in the US, Bruce & Bridgeland (2014) highlighted how mentoring had increase these young adults' aspirations for HE. In fact, according to the said report, 76 per cent of at-risk young adults who had a mentor aspired to obtain a college degree, while 56 per cent of at-risk young adults without mentors had similar aspirations.

Besides low HE aspirations, another issue faced by disadvantaged students is that of **"summer melt" – despite receiving offers from universities, these students may fail to enrol when the new academic year starts**. Research in the US has shown that almost 40 per cent of students who have received university offers eventually fail to enrol. There are numerous reasons for "summer melt". For example, disadvantaged students (many of whom are from low-income households) may have difficulty obtaining the necessary funds and financial aid needed to pay for their university education, which is particularly expensive if the university is a top university. Moreover, there is a copious amount of administrative work to be completed, such as registration for freshman orientation, registration for and completion of academic placement tests, filling in housing forms etc. These tasks are especially difficult for disadvantaged students because they typically lack professional guidance and support – they are no longer able to rely on their high school counsellors during the summer break and are unable to afford private advisors. Moreover, the parents of disadvantaged students are unlikely to have experience with the college process. Also, they may not even have the time to help them with the necessary preparation because of their long working hours (Arnold et al., 2009). As such, disadvantaged students of low socio-economic status may face difficulties handling issues such as absentee parents and unstable home environments (Rauner, 2000). Besides the tangible barriers, there are also intangible barriers. For example, a significant proportion of disadvantaged students may not have had experience venturing beyond their immediate community, and may have difficulty transitioning to university as they may not be willing to step beyond their comfort zones into the unfamiliar, possibly intimidating university environment (Acs & Loprest, n.d.). Thus, for

disadvantaged students, there exist both tangible and intangible barriers to enrolling at university. Overall, “summer melt” is an important issue to consider in widening participation because simply ensuring that disadvantaged students receive offers is insufficient. It is also crucial to reduce summer attrition to ensure that disadvantaged students are able to matriculate at universities.

Peer mentoring has been identified as a way to **mitigate summer melt** as a form of additional support during the summer break (Castleman & Page, 2013). Peer mentoring is particularly effective in enabling a paradigm shift in the mind-sets and perceptions of disadvantaged students towards university culture and environment. This is especially true if the peer mentors are of a similar background, and are doing well at university. Moreover, with a shift in mind-sets and a consequent reduction in the psychic costs (i.e. costs imposed on an individual in the form of added stress or negative emotions) related to attending university, disadvantaged students would be more likely to complete the necessary university preparation. Peer mentors could also reduce summer attrition rates by concretising the potential benefits of university. This is helpful for disadvantaged first-generation students who are unable to visualise life at university because they are unable to visit the campus of the university they are supposed to enrol at due to financial and/or time constraints. By giving these disadvantaged students an idea of what university life is like, peer mentors help to assuage their fears regarding the new and unfamiliar environment at university. Thus, mentors providing mentees with **assurance and emotional support**, thereby encouraging them to enrol at the university.

In a similar vein, other research studies have also shown that mentoring programmes aid students in **integrating into a university or workplace community**. In the context of a university, mentoring helps to ameliorate negative emotions caused by the transition from prior schooling experience (Austin, 2002; Ostrove & Long, 2007). Similarly, O’Brien et al. (2012) showed that for a group of university students who had just entered university, a six-week peer mentoring programme assuaged mentees’ worries and fears about not fitting in at the university. Mentoring also helps current university students feel more connected and engaged on campus, which has positive spill-over effects on student outcomes (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2009; Pascarella, 1980). These are also important, particularly for peer mentoring programmes, because an increase in the sense of belonging of mentees to the university community would increase the probability that these mentees would give back to the mentoring programme by volunteering as mentors (Hamilton et al., 2019). Beyond the university setting, Payne and Huffman (2005) conducted a study on more than 1,000 army officers, and found that mentoring increased the mentees’ affective commitment, defined as an employee’s “emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organisation” (Meyer & Allen, 1991, p.67).

Mentoring also has positive psychosocial impacts on students currently studying at university, such as **increasing student motivation**, which in turn **reduces student attrition**

**rates.** For instance, in a meta-analysis by Eby et al. (2008), it was found that college students with mentors had slightly higher levels of motivation and lower levels of dropout vis-à-vis non-mentored peers. Moreover, a study by Larose et al. (2011) analysed the impact of a Canadian academic mentoring programme, Mentoring for the Integration and Success of Science Students (MIREs), which aims to prevent student dropout in math, science and technology (MST) courses. In MST courses, possible motivational factors that induce attrition include low academic self-efficacy, involvement and interest, and a lack of value and importance accorded to scientific disciplines (Watt & Eccles, 2008). In addition, students may not be certain whether the careers in MST are suitable for them, which is an especially prevalent concern amongst females (Schaefer et al., 1997). These doubts and the associated anxiety contribute to the lack of perseverance in MST programmes. It was evident that the MIREs programme had positive effects on the mentees: the mentees were more motivated in their MST studies, more certain about their future MST-related career and more well-adjusted to life at university. Notably, the positive effects with regard to student career decision were observed after just one semester of mentoring. But, the positive effects with regard to academic motivation and adjustment to university life were only apparent at the end of the one-year mentoring programme, thereby highlighting the importance of having a mentoring programme that lasts at least a year, as echoed by other research studies (Lawner & Beltz, 2013).

Also, research has indicated that mentoring increases mentees' **self-efficacy**, where self-efficacy refers to "people's beliefs in their capabilities to produce desired effects by their own actions" (Bandura, 1997, p.7). This is because sources of self-efficacy (e.g. verbal persuasion and vicarious experience) are important parts of mentoring (Byrne, 2013). Hamilton et al. (2019) carried out a study based on a formal university mentoring programme that paired third- and fourth-year undergraduate students with mentors from industry. The study highlighted that the mentoring programme increased the job search self-efficacy of mentees. The explanation provided is that mentoring programmes provide mentees with efficacy information, which consequently increase the mentees' self-efficacy (i.e. an increase in confidence regarding the different aspects of the job search). For example, mentees receive the following types of information about self-efficacy: personal mastery experiences (e.g. successes), observational learning (e.g. role modelling), persuasion (e.g. social encouragement) and physiological/affective states (e.g. positive/negative emotions linked with performing certain tasks) (Bandura, 1978; Lent et al., 2017; Lent & Brown, 2013). Mentees receive these types of information from their mentors, who share their own experiences with their mentees and provide mentees with encouragement and social support. Also, (Parsa et al., 2016) conducted a study on academic employees at two Iranian universities. They discovered a significant and positive correlation between mentoring and occupational self-efficacy ( $r=0.60$ ,  $p\text{-value}=0$ ), which is defined as "the competence that a person feels concerning the ability to successfully fulfil the tasks involved in his or her job" (Rigotti et al., 2008). In turn, increased self-efficacy was found to contribute to career advancement in the present study.

## **Summary**

- Mentoring improves mentees' self-esteem, psychological well-being and social skills.
- Mentoring increases mentees' HE aspirations.
- Peer mentoring could mitigate the effect of "summer melt" (i.e. disadvantaged students fail to enrol in university when the new academic year starts despite receiving offers), assuaging mentees' fears regarding the new and unfamiliar environment at university, and providing them with assurance and emotional support.
- Mentoring aids students in integrating into the university community and ameliorates negative emotions caused by the transition from prior schooling experience.
- For university students, mentoring increases student motivation, which in turn reduces student attrition rates.
- Mentoring increases mentees' self-efficacy (i.e. people's beliefs in their capabilities to produce desired effects by their own actions).

The next section will explore the different moderators of mentoring.

### 3. Moderators of Mentoring

#### 3.1. Contact Frequency and Duration

The duration of mentorship plays an important role in determining the effectiveness of the mentorship. **Dependency** is an issue in mentoring relationships, and research has postulated that the mentoring period should be long enough (Rhodes & DuBois, 2006) to ensure that **mentees transition gradually from a state of dependency to a state of autonomy and agency** (Larson, 2006). In Grossman and Rhodes' (2002) study of the BBBS mentoring programme, they found that the benefits from the mentorship became progressively stronger as the mentoring relationship persisted. Specifically, the benefits were the greatest for mentees in mentoring relationships that lasted one year or longer. In contrast, the researchers noted that for the mentoring relationships which were terminated within the first three months, the mentees experienced adverse consequences, such as a decline in their global self-worth and perceived academic competence. A plausible cause is the sudden halt of support whilst in the dependency phase, which may lead to a sense of rejection and arouse previous painful experiences that impede mentee functioning.

Unfortunately, the **optimal duration for mentoring relationships is not well-established**. Rhodes (2002) postulates that the optimal duration depends on other factors, such as the characteristics and needs of the mentee, the mentor's aptitude and background, the contact frequency and the desired outcomes of the programme. Still, other research literature has found that the mentoring relationships may be particularly beneficial when they remain in the mentee's life for multiple years (Klaw et al., 2003). This is because the mentoring relationships would have the opportunity to facilitate adaptation through significant stages of the mentee's development (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005b; Werner, 1995).

Besides the duration of the mentorship, the frequency of contact also influences the **effectiveness and longevity** of the mentorship. This is because regular contact enables other desirable processes to occur in the mentoring relationship. For example, regular meetings promote involvement in specific types of interactions, such as programme-relevant activities, which then serve to foster development of close ties between mentors and mentees (Parra et al., 2002). Moreover, in the context of adult-youth mentoring, regular contact results in a deeper integration of an adult mentor into the youth mentee's social network (DuBois et al., 2002). Several studies have found positive correlations between mentee-mentor contact frequency and mentorship benefits (Ensher & Murphy, 1997; Furano et al., 1993; Santos & Reigadas, 2002). Specifically, these benefits include:

- better intensity and longevity of mentoring relationships (Ensher & Murphy, 1997; Furano et al., 1993),
- adjustment to college, perceived mentor supportiveness and programme satisfaction (Santos & Reigadas, 2002).

As such, the research literature contains several suggestions to increase contact frequency. For instance, Ensher & Murphy (1997) stated that mentoring programmes should **implement and monitor a policy to ensure that mentees and mentors meet frequently on a regular basis**. In their study on the BBBS programme, Parra et al. (2002) suggest increasing mentor efficacy beliefs, which were found to significantly influence the mentee-mentor contact frequency. To increase mentor efficacy beliefs, they suggest **providing training for mentors**, because even a limited amount of training was shown to be helpful in developing mentors' sense of efficacy for engaging in effective relationship building activities with their mentees.

However, it is worth noting that there may be a **trade-off between the duration of the mentoring relationship and contact frequency**. In the study by Furano et al. (1993), they observed a trend toward a decrease in contact frequency in longer term mentoring relationships. This finding is echoed by DuBois and Neville (1997), who also analysed the data from the BBBS programme. It seems that as the benefits of longevity manifest in the mentoring relationships, contact frequency decreases, and mentee-mentor pairs are unable to fully reap the benefits from more established relationships.

### **Summary**

- The mentoring period should be sufficiently long to ensure that mentees transition gradually from a state of dependency to a state of autonomy and agency.
- However, the optimal duration for mentoring relationships is not well-established. Still, some studies have found that benefits were the greatest in mentoring relationships that lasted one year or longer.
- Contact frequency also influences the effectiveness and longevity of the mentorship.
- To increase contact frequency, researchers suggest implementing and monitoring a policy to ensure that mentees and mentors meet frequently on a regular basis, as well as providing training for mentors to develop their sense of efficacy.
- However, there may be a trade-off between the duration of the mentoring relationship and contact frequency.

The next sub-section will focus specifically on the relatability aspect of a mentoring relationship, and will explore how this can be influenced by several factors (demographic, mental etc.).



### 3.2. Relatability

In the context of mentorship, relatability refers to the **mentee's ability to feel an intrinsic connection with their mentors, and vice versa**. The degree of relatability between two individuals is discovered to be linked to the similarities between them, as suggested by the similarity attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971). The more similar one perceives another person to be, the more the other person is liked. The following paragraphs will examine how actual and perceived similarities between mentees and mentors affect the quality of their relationship and success of the mentorship.

Research has shown that **demographic similarity** (e.g. in terms of race and gender) contribute to **higher levels of identification and interpersonal comfort**. Ragins (1997) theorised that diversified relationships are less likely to be marked by interpersonal comfort than homogenous ones. The social identity theory can also explain this phenomenon, in that overlapping identities and shared experiences between same-sex mentorships facilitate interpersonal comfort (Tajfel et al., 2004). In general, when mentees and mentors of the same race and gender are paired together, the initial barrier of getting to know someone new can be broken down more easily, as both parties feel more comfortable with each other, and can engage in conversations that are personal to their demographics (Allen et al., 2005). In a study examining the role of interpersonal comfort as a mediating mechanism in mentoring relationships, Allen et al. (2005) observed a positive correlation between gender similarity and interpersonal comfort, suggesting that a positive relationship between gender similarity and mentorship could be attributable to interpersonal comfort. Allen and Eby (2003) also explore the mediating effect of similarity in terms of gender on learning and mentorship quality. They propose that same-gender mentoring pairs result in greater learning and are of a higher quality compared to cross-gender pairs. Same-gender mentorship dyads are more conducive to establishing identification and interpersonal comfort.

As a result of higher levels of identification and interpersonal comfort, mentoring relationships that are based on **demographic similarity** result in **higher mentorship quality**. Kram (1988) carried out a study on 18 mentee-mentor developmental relationships, involving young managers (mentees) and older managers (mentors) in a large north eastern public utility. In the study, she found that female mentees in cross-gender relationships often face difficulties in seeing the male mentor as an adequate role model, which is one of the significant psychosocial functions of developmental relationships. As such, the young female managers sought support and guidance from other female peers. Furthermore, Thomas (1990) conducted a study on 487 mentor-protégé developmental relationships in a large US public utility company. The study highlighted that same-gender relationships resulted in more psychosocial support and career support vis-à-vis cross-gender relationships. Same-race relationships were also found to provide significantly more psychosocial support than

cross-race relationships due to a higher level of identification and interpersonal comfort. Santos and Reigadas (2002) observed that students with same-race mentees perceived their mentors to be significantly more supportive in furthering their personal and career development, and reported higher overall satisfaction of the programme.

However, it is worth noting in the research literature, there are **conflicting views** on the **impact of demographic similarities** on the quality of mentoring relationships. While aforementioned studies support the view that gender and racial similarities contribute to the success of a mentorship, others have stated otherwise. For example, Hickson (2002) surveyed students from historically black universities in Texas and found that an overwhelming minority of students (0.12%) thought it was important for a college professor mentor to be of the same race. Instead, most students felt that it was more important to have a professor, regardless of race, who is concerned about their future and takes interest in their education. Also, Kanchewa et al. (2014) evaluated mentoring relationship ratings by 1,513 mentees (8–18 years old) from two large, randomised controlled studies of mentoring programs (Bernstein et al., 2009; Herrera et al., 2007). They showed that the only significant difference between same-gender and cross-gender relationships was that cross-gender pairs met more frequently and for 2 weeks longer than same-gender pairs. In addition, Thomas (1990) showed that there was no significant difference in the amount of career support provided by same-race and cross-race relationships. This could suggest that the effect of race on the dynamics of developmental relationships is the strongest when the relationship transitions beyond the instrumental focus on career. Furthermore, Turban et al. (2002) discovered that demographic similarity becomes less important in long-term mentoring, since as the individuals learn more about each other, superficial characteristics are given less importance.

While having similar demographic backgrounds may increase the probability of fostering a deeper connection, it may not always lead to close mentoring relationships. If the mentee and mentor have nothing in common apart from their race, gender, or other demographic characteristics, it would be a challenge for them to form a close-knit relationship. Conversely, if the mentee and mentor are able to hit it off during their first few meetings with each other and find commonalities between their personalities, the mentoring relationship could still be a successful one, regardless of their race or gender. In line with this, Ensher and Murphy (1997) observed that although racial similarity is important for liking and instrumental functions, it is not crucial for satisfaction or the desire to sustain the mentoring relationship. Instead, if mentees find perceived similarities between them and their mentors, race would not factor into their satisfaction. This leads to the next point on perceived similarities' contribution to mentor-mentee relatability.

Apart from establishing bonds based on actual similarities between mentor and mentee, **perceived similarities** can also play a crucial role in developing mentoring relationships. The idea behind this relation is that when mentors and mentees find commonalities between

them that both can relate to, it enhances the mentor's and mentee's liking of each other, which encourages them to **continue their conversation and develop their mentoring relationship**. Ensher and Murphy (1997) found a strong correlation between perceived similarities and satisfaction with the mentorship relationship ( $r = 0.77$ ). Many of the mentor-mentee pairings that bonded over perceived similarities also went on to report increased durations of mentor-mentee contact, indicating both parties' interest to maintain their relationship even beyond the formal mentorship context. Relatedly, Allen and Eby (2003) identified that if mentors perceive their mentees to be similar to them in terms of attitude, personality, beliefs and other traits, they will be more willing to invest time and effort in the mentorship. To explain this, social psychology literature discussing helping suggests that individuals prefer to help others who are similar to themselves in terms of personality (Leek & Smith, 1989). This literature also postulates that there are costs associated with mentees perceived as very different by the mentor. In particular, there is greater uncertainty when dealing with individuals who are perceived to be very different, which can be threatening (Schroeder et al., 1994).

However, an issue is that perceived similarities between two individuals are more **difficult to identify at the initial stage of the mentoring relationship**. Unlike actual similarities, information on potential mentor and mentee's interests and perspectives are typically not made known when one applies for a mentorship. The development of perceived similarities typically only begins during the first few interactions of the mentorship. Hence, Ensher and Murphy (1997) suggest that organisations with mentoring programmes should consider conducting training that enables mentors and mentees to recognise their similarities and bridge their differences.

As a moderator to a successful mentorship, **relatability supports other instrumental and psychosocial factors** that directly affect the mentoring relationship. For instance, Goldner and Mayseless (2008) noted correlations between a close mentor-mentee relationship and a mentee's increased academic competencies ( $r = 0.39$ ), enhanced relationships with family and friends ( $r = 0.56$ ) and their emotional wellbeing ( $r = 0.73$ ). Therefore, one can conclude that while relatability may not contribute tangible outputs to the mentoring relationship, its importance remains significant in contributing to a fruitful mentorship experience.

### **Summary**

- Relatability can be defined as the intrinsic connection, or lack thereof, between mentors and mentees. We evaluate the importance of relatability in terms of actual and perceived similarities between the two parties.
- Demographic similarities (such as race or gender) provide greater interpersonal comfort within the relationship, setting the foundations for building a strong mentoring relationship.

- There exist mixed views on the importance of demographic similarities in contributing to the quality of the mentoring relationship, particularly in the long run.
- Perceived similarities (e.g. similar interests, beliefs, or outlook on life) play a crucial role in mentoring relationships. They encourage mentorship participants to prolong their conversations and continue the friendship even after the mentorship period, as participants bond over their commonalities.
- However, perceived similarities are more challenging to identify, and depends on whether mentors and mentees are able to seek out these similarities in the initial phase, that will lead them to build the relationship further.

The next sub-section will focus on the mentee-mentor closeness, and will examine how this can be fostered by several factors, including perceived similarity.

### 3.3. Mentee-mentor Closeness

Mentee-mentor closeness plays an important role in influencing mentorship outcomes for a number of reasons. One reason is that a strong bond serves as **a direct source of emotional support and validation** (Herrera et al., 2000), and enhances the mentee's **sense of relatedness and trust** toward other people, thereby facilitating the mentee's social development (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). As such, the mentee also becomes more receptive to the mentor's advice and guidance (Rhodes, 2002). A close bond could also influence mentoring outcomes through increasing the amount of effort that mentees and mentors put into sustaining the mentoring relationship. Also, if there is no strong bond between the mentee and mentor, the mentoring relationship may not be sustained long enough for mentee's to reap benefits (Herrera et al., 2000). In addition, Parra et al. (2002) highlighted that closeness mediates linkages between mentoring relationship characteristics (e.g. mentee-mentor contact) and perceived benefits for the mentee.

The research literature highlights the correlation between mentee-mentor closeness and mentoring outcomes. For example, in the context of informal mentoring, DuBois and Silverthorn (2005) stated that closeness increases the likelihood of favourable mentee outcomes, such as improved mental health and reduced substance use, regardless of frequency of contact and relationship duration. Also, DuBois and Neville (1997) conducted a study based on the BBBS of America mentoring programme and discovered that the mentors' feelings of closeness were associated with various positive outcomes. These include fewer obstacles in the mentoring relationship (e.g. arguments and disagreements), as well as greater general benefits for the mentee. Furthermore, Herrera et al. (2000) carried out a study involving 600 mentee-mentor pairs, and observed that "at the crux of the mentoring relationship is the bond that forms between the youth and mentor. If a bond does not form, then youth and mentors may disengage from the match before the mentoring relationship lasts long enough to have a positive impact on youth" (p.31).

Closeness between mentee and mentor can be fostered by a variety of factors. For example, factors such as **empathy and authenticity** enable mentees and mentors to form strong bonds (Spencer, 2016). Also, the experience of **having fun and enjoying each other's company** could strengthen bonds (Spencer & Rhodes, 2005). Relatedly, Herrera et al. (2000) noted that mentors and mentees who engage in more social and academic activities together tend to report higher levels of closeness. Other research literature also highlights that **perceived similarities** (in terms of personalities, interests, as well as mentoring expectations and goals) play a part in forming strong bonds (Bernier et al., 2005; Madia & Lutz, 2004). However, the research literature has also identified that actual similarity (in terms of race) does not have a significant effect on closeness (Sánchez & Colón, 2005)

### ***Summary***

- A strong mentee-mentor bond serves as a direct source of emotional support and validation, and enhances the mentee's sense of relatedness and trust toward other people, thereby facilitating social development. Mentees also become more receptive to the mentor's advice and guidance.
- A close bond also influences mentoring outcomes through increasing the amount of effort that mentees and mentors put into sustaining the mentoring relationship.
- Mentee-mentor closeness can be fostered by factors such as: empathy and authenticity, having fun and enjoying each other's company, and perceived similarities.

The next section will explore these findings in relation to PA's mentoring model.

## 4. Discussions: Situating PA's mentoring model

In this section, we apply the findings from the literature review (as discussed in sections 2. and 3.) to PA's primary data, which consists of both annual and quarterly impact measurement surveys<sup>2</sup>, conducted in the years 2018, 2019 and 2020.

### 4.1. Instrumental Reasons

According to PA's 2018 Annual Impact Survey Report, respondents were asked to rate their improvement in knowledge about the admissions process as a result of PA on a scale of 0 (no improvement) to 10 (significant improvement) (Project Access, 2018). On average, respondents gave a rating of 6.17, which indicates moderately strong improvement.

In the same survey, when asked to identify the most valuable aspects of the mentorship, respondents gave the following responses: "*Application: help with components of application*" and "*Choices: Talking to someone about different subjects and university choices*". These findings point to the instrumental benefits of mentoring, which is in line with the literature findings as discussed in sub-section 2.1.

In PA's 2019 Annual Impact Survey Report, 60% of surveyed mentees using PA's mentoring platform in 2019 received offers from world leading universities, as opposed to the baseline UK national average of 15% (Project Access, 2019a). When the 256 respondents were asked "*How much do you think your knowledge of the application process improved as a result of Project Access?*", the average response was 6.4. This implies that the mentoring programme served the purposes of informational provision and direct application help. In addition, respondents provided positive feedback that underscores the instrumental benefits of mentoring. For example, a respondent pointed to the "systematic help in every step of the application that enabled [them] to tackle this endeavour of applying in the first place".

From PA's 2019 Q4 Mentee Survey Report, the instrumental benefits of the mentorship are also evident (Project Access, 2019b). This can be seen from the responses to the open-ended question "*What was the best part of PA?*". Out of 157 responses, 107 responses (68.1%) indicated that the best part of PA was the practical guidance received from mentors. Specifically, the respondents indicated that the mentors had relevant first-hand experience and provided guidance on different aspects of the application process, decision-making, as well as their A-Level examination.

In PA's 2020 Q1 Mentee Survey Report, we can also see the instrumental benefits of the mentorship. In particular, respondents stated that the element of the university application that their mentor helped most with was the personal statement (Project Access, 2020a).

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<sup>2</sup> Mentee-mentor closeness has been omitted in this section because PA's surveys do not collect information pertaining to closeness.

## 4.2. Psychosocial Reasons

In PA's 2018 Annual Impact Survey Report, respondents identified "*Encouragement: Realising these universities were for people like me*" as the second most valuable aspect of the mentorship (Project Access, 2018), pointing to the psychosocial benefits of mentoring.

In PA's 2019 Annual Impact Survey Report, the feedback from respondents also highlighted the psychosocial benefits that they acquired from the mentoring programme (Project Access, 2019a). For example, respondents said:

- "It ... motivated me to apply to Oxbridge in the first place."
- "Project Access made my experience of applying to a foreign university so manageable and safe, that I ended up getting that last bit of confidence you need to succeed."

Hence, we can see that the first respondent experienced an increase in aspirations as a result of the mentorship, while the second respondent received social support and a boost in confidence, which is especially crucial for international students seeking outbound student mobility.

From PA's 2019 Q4 Mentee Survey Report, we also see the psychosocial benefits of mentoring that were identified in the literature (Project Access, 2019b). In response to the open-ended question "*What was the best part of PA?*", the qualitative data shows that out of 157 responses, 16 responses (10.2%) mentioned that the best part of PA was the social support they received from their mentors. Particularly, mentors provided them with encouragement and moral support, built their confidence and generated enthusiasm.

## 4.3. Contact Frequency and Duration

In PA's 2018 Annual Impact Survey Report, when asked to suggest areas for improvement, some respondents suggested that PA train mentors to conduct mock interviews, which is in line with the suggestions in the research literature on mentor training (Project Access, 2018). In addition, 11 respondents (7%) were dissatisfied with their experience and 9 out of those 11 listed the lack of mentor engagement as the reason for their bad experience. Also, some of the respondents experienced inconsistent service with a high mentor engagement at the beginning fading down throughout the process. For instance, one of the respondents stated that "The best part was getting to know my mentor. It was an unfortunate disappointment, but the initiative was good. Make the mentors understand that there are people counting on them". These sentiments were also reflected in PA's 2019 Annual Impact Survey Report (Project Access, 2019a).

In PA's 2019 Q4 Mentee Survey Report, a clear correlation between the mentor-mentee contact frequency and the Net Promoter Score (NPS) was observed (Project Access, 2019b). Contact frequency was categorised into: "no contact", "1 to 2 times", "up to 5 times" and "5 or more times". The NPS was used as a proxy for satisfaction with PA's mentoring programme, and ranged from 0 to 10. It was evident that the share of respondents who had no contact with their mentors dropped with the rising NPS. The analysis also focused on the pool of respondents who gave a NPS of 7 to 10, because this NPS range had a large sample of respondents. For this range of NPS, it was evident that there was an increasing proportion of respondents who stated that they contact their mentors "5 or more times" as the NPS increased. Furthermore, it was found that approximately 53% of respondents who gave a NPS of 0 to 3 complained about having little or no contact with their mentor.

In addition, when respondents were asked "*What is the best part of PA?*", of 157 responses, 5 indicated that the best part of PA was that "mentors were available/easy to contact". On the flip side, when respondents were asked "*What is something that we need to improve on?*", 21 responses indicated that PA needs to ensure that "mentor contacts mentee more frequently".

In PA's 2020 Q1 Mentor Survey, mentors were asked to rate the extent to which mentees benefitted from the mentorship on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicated that mentees did not benefit at all, while 5 indicated that mentees benefitted greatly (Project Access, 2020b). For mentors who selected either 3 or 4, some stated that mentees did not benefit greatly because mentee-mentor contact frequency was insufficient.

In addition, when the mentor survey respondents were asked to indicate their satisfaction with the amount of training provided by PA, the general sense was that mentors were not satisfied with the amount of training provided. As seen from the research literature, mentor training is important in increasing mentors' sense of efficacy for engaging in effective relationship building activities with their mentees, which could in turn contribute to higher contact frequency. Hence, PA should provide more training for its mentors.

Overall, these findings support the research literature, which showed that the satisfaction with the mentoring relationship would increase with increased mentee-mentor contact frequency. However, PA's surveys do not capture information of the duration of the mentoring relationship. This could be a potential data point to capture in future surveys.

Also, it is worth noting that in the literature, mentees are assumed to transition gradually from a state of dependency to a state of autonomy and agency (Larson, 2006), with the assumption that there exists a static objective in the mentoring relationship. However, in PA's context, the mentoring relationship may have fluctuating needs (e.g. application support, post-application support, psychosocial support etc.), which may confound a smooth linear transition identified in the literature.



#### 4.4. Relatability

In PA's 2018 and 2019 Annual Impact Survey Reports, as well as the 2020 Q1 Mentor Survey Report, respondents were asked to list the attributes that are important in ensuring the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship (Project Access, 2018, 2019a, 2020). Across the three surveys, the respondents gave the following ranking, with rank 1 being the most popular option:

1. Subject
2. University
3. Nationality
4. Socio-economic background

Relatedly, in PA's 2020 Q1 Mentor Survey Report, mentors were asked about their satisfaction regarding their mentor-mentee pairing, as well as the reasons for any dissatisfaction (Project Access, 2020b). Of 19 respondents, 13 indicated that they were not fully satisfied with the pairing. These respondents listed a number of reasons, such as:

- Mentee's top choice university is not the university the mentor is studying at
- Mentee's desired course is different from the mentor's course
- Mentee is from a different country

These findings echo the findings from the literature on relatability. Specifically, they highlight how demographic similarities provide greater interpersonal comfort within the relationship, setting the foundations for building a strong mentoring relationship. From PA's survey report, we can see that the respondents recognised the importance of actual similarities, such as country of origin and socio-economic background, in building a strong mentoring relationship.

Additionally, in PA's 2019 Q4 Mentee Report, when respondents were asked "*What is the best part of PA?*", of 157 responses, 7 indicated that the best part of PA was that "mentors were a good fit" (Project Access, 2019b). Respondents were also asked "*What is something that we need to improve on?*". There were 7 responses which requested "better matching of mentees and mentors (in terms of compatibility/similarities)". These findings show that mentees value relatability and hope to have mentors who share similarities with them. However, it seems that PA could improve the pairing of mentees and mentors, by ensuring that they are matched based on the aforementioned attributes.

The final section will conclude the report by discussing the limitations of this report and possible future directions moving forward.

## **5. Conclusions**

### **5.1. Limitations**

The method of finding literature did not follow the rigours of a typical academic literature review/meta-analysis/systematic analysis, and the scope was narrow. This is a relatively brief report that serves to formalise PA's current foundational understandings of mentoring. There are likely further references out that complement or contradict the findings presented here due to the contextualised nature of mentoring.

### **5.2. Conclusion and future thoughts**

This report shall serve as the foundational basis for future research efforts in PA towards mentoring. It should be revised accordingly at least once every new Global Leadership Team renewal to ensure theoretical coherence and robustness with new organisational leadership and/or directions.

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