

## Staff mentoring in Higher Education: the case for a mentored mentoring continuum\*

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### Abstract

Mentoring provides a chance for both personal and professional development in mentee and mentor. It has previously been suggested that mentoring involves an integrated approach combining four development constructs consisting of coaching, counselling, networking/facilitation, and guardianship.

The aim of this case study was to explore the case for a mentored mentoring continuum when compared with the usual dyadic or group mentoring approaches. This study was conducted through mentoring, discussion and development of ideas with a group of four people working in Cork Institute of Technology, Ireland, during 2017: a mentoring guide, senior mentor, mentor also acting as mentee and second mentee. Nine structured meetings were held, which included both an agreed agenda and a recording of minutes, and which were reviewed and agreed by mentors/mentees. Informal and unstructured meetings were also held throughout the period. Meetings were mentee-and mentor-driven, variously.

The case study consisted of an exploration of the aspects of a mentored mentoring continuum that was reported to have facilitated enhanced and continuous professional and personal development in all participants. A comparison of this proposed method with the traditional dyadic model of mentoring is presented. We contend that there is increased support for mentors and mentees within the mentored mentoring model, that the potential for learning is greater than with the dyadic model. We suggest that mentor training is vital, and that while mentoring may be time-consuming, we agree with the findings of others that the mentors benefit as much from mentoring relationships as do the mentees.

**Keywords:** Mentoring, mentored mentoring continuum.

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## 1. Introduction

Recently, mentoring has been introduced in Cork Institute of Technology, Cork, Ireland, (CIT) as a support system for new staff members. The role of staff mentor has been created to facilitate staff mentoring.

The evolution of staff mentoring in CIT came firstly from findings by 2015 that having a peer-assisted learning and support programme among undergraduate students was very beneficial to students entering third level in CIT. On a national level, the Droichead induction and mentoring programme for second level newly-qualified teachers had completed its pilot stage (2011-2013) and had been rolled out nationally from 2013 (Teaching Council of Ireland 2015/2016). In 2016, it was decided to pilot a similar programme among newly-appointed lecturing staff at CIT, subsequently extending to all staff.

We consider that the mentoring role can be broadly defined as having three main aspects, namely supporting, challenging and facilitating a professional vision. The reason for CIT's focus on encouraging mentoring for newly-appointed staff was that this employee group was deemed to have the greatest need of support.

Klasen and Clutterbuck (2002) suggest that mentoring involves an integrated approach combining four development approaches: coaching, counselling, networking/facilitation, and guardianship. These incorporate both intellectual and emotional needs of the mentee. It is a process whereby the needs of the relationship are dictated by the mentee and not the mentor (Klasen and Clutterbuck, 2002). Crisp (2009) has also identified four domains of mentoring, namely psychological/emotional support, support for goal-setting and career choice, academic support and role modelling. Importantly, there is a requirement for ethically sound behaviour in the mentor that guarantees putting the interests of the mentee first. Mentoring has been defined as a dyadic (one-to-one), face-to-face, long-term relationship between a supervisory adult and a novice student (Donaldson, Ensher & Grant-Vallone, 2000), a definition that was reached following those authors' consideration of the general consensus, and more recently by Sambunjak (2015).

For the purpose of our own study, we extended the definition of Donaldson, Ensher & Grant-Vallone (2000) to encompass mentoring staff peers. The second column of Table 1 shows referenced benefits of dyadic mentoring, which include support for the mentee, improved communication, facilitation of another person, development of strategies for managing situations that arise through paired dialogue, and improved career satisfaction and development. However, as Table 1 also shows, the dyadic approach requires mentor training

each time and it limits the potential for collaborative interactions. It should be noted that the fourth column of Table 1 refers to the model proposed in the current paper.

Within a HEI, mentoring is a voluntary activity, without a defined benefit to mentor or mentee in terms of pay or time allowance. Many roles within a HEI, including those of the lecturing and student placement roles that are described in this case study, are largely autonomous, which might potentially lead to feelings of uncertainty and isolation in a new member of staff, so the benefits to mentoring defined by Klasen and Clutterbuck (2002) are evident. Two American studies of mentoring by nurse educators of trainee nurses identified aspects of successful mentoring as being a reciprocal relationship with open communication, guidance and support in role transition, and planned mentoring activities. It was concluded in these studies that the mentors benefited as much as their mentees from the process. Challenges to the successful mentoring process included a lack of time, however (White *et al.*, 2010) (Wilson *et al.*, 2010).

According to Hunsaker *et al.* (2010), when people are listening, they can be placed in one of four general categories, i.e., non-listener, marginal listener, evaluative listener and active listener. Of these categories, active listening is the most effective form of communication, which suggests that it should be the predominant approach as a mentor. However, active listening does not come naturally to most of us, and, like other communication skills, it must be learned and developed (Jahromi *et al.*, 2016).

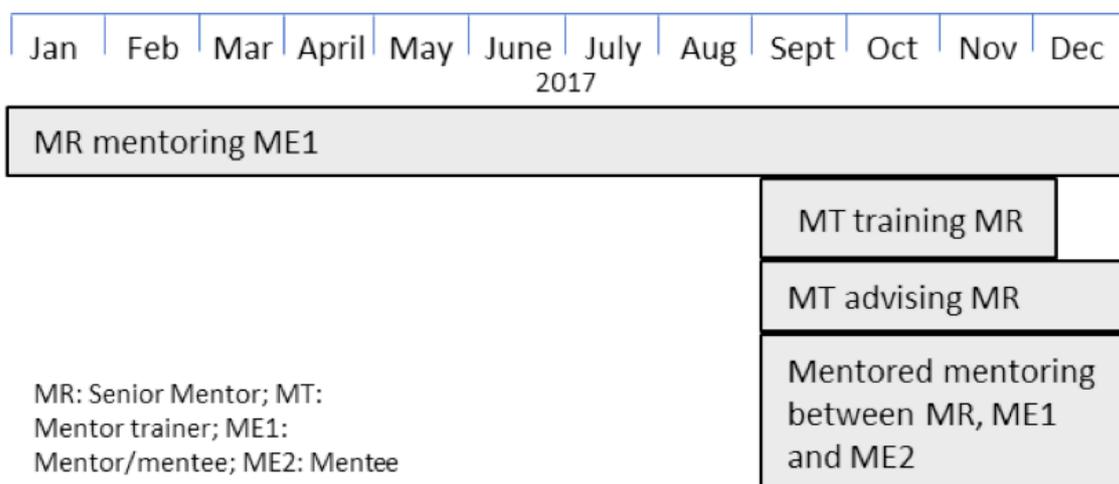
The purpose of the current paper was primarily to challenge the definition of mentoring as a dyadic interaction, and it describes our tested approach consisting of a trio of persons, whereby interactions were often triadic (mentored mentoring) and sometimes dyadic, as required. The analysis is based on the combined mentor/mentee experiences of three members of staff following planned mentoring, between January and December 2017.

## 2 Method

### Study structure and implementation

The current mentoring study took place between January and December of 2017. The mentoring group comprised the following: a senior lecturer as mentor (MR), a mentoring trainer for the institute, who provided support and guidance for the mentor (MT), an assistant lecturer, who commenced work in January of 2017 (ME1, as mentor and mentee), and a new student placement coordinator for the department, who commenced work in September of 2017 (ME2, as mentee to both MR and ME1). All meetings, whether formal or informal, were

confidential. The timelines for the mentoring-related activities described in the current paper are shown in Figure 1. The principles underlying the group's mentoring interactions during this time are shown in the fourth column of Table 1.



**Figure 1. Timelines for mentoring and mentor training for the mentoring group described in the current paper**

New fulltime lecturers in CIT can now expect to have 18 contact hours with students per week during semesters. In a research-active science department, scheduled student contact hours are likely to fall into four main categories, namely lecturing, laboratory tuition, undergraduate research project supervision, and postgraduate supervision following successful application for research funding. Outside of student contact hours, preparation, correcting and administration duties are the principal activities undertaken. A placement co-ordinator's key roles consist of meetings with students, meetings with prospective industry interviewers and supervisors, and scheduling training sessions and interviews with students in presentation skills and curriculum vitae.

### Background to the case study

This mentoring group was initiated when the Head of Department (HOD) asked a senior lecturer (MR) whether she might be interested in mentoring a new lecturing mentee (ME1) on their arrival to take up their post, in January of 2017. Eight months later, on arrival of another new member of staff to take up a new position as placement co-ordinator, the HOD also suggested that MR would act as mentor for the second mentee (ME2). This presented an

opportunity for ME1 to act as mentor to ME2 in a structured mentoring strategy involving all three persons. A process was established, whereby MR, ME1 and ME2 were free to request meetings as required. Pre-observation, observation and post-observation meetings or discussions were conducted. The pre-observation meetings included a discussion of ground rules, scheduling of meetings and recording of meetings, and they facilitated discussions by the mentor to best enable the mentee(s) to identify the area of practice to be observed. During observations, the mentor (whether actually mentoring another mentor or mentoring a mentee) encouraged the mentee towards clarifying their challenges and towards finding their own solutions. During post-observations there was a debriefing of people's experiences since the observation and an assessment together of whether changes in their awareness had occurred since the last observation and also whether any behavioural changes had occurred in all parties.

#### *Mentor training*

Training of MR took place between September and November (2017), in the form of a 10-credit mentoring module, which is part of the MA in Teaching and Learning at CIT; advice was also sought of MT by MR as required.

#### *Mentor/mentee meetings*

All mentoring-related meetings were confidential between MR, ME1, ME2 and MT. Unstructured mentor/mentee meetings between January and June of 2017 were all informal; nine meetings that took place between September and December were formally structured; informal and unstructured meetings also took place during that period. Formal meetings, which had a defined agenda agreed by the participants, had the following headings:

(1) Early considerations of our mentor/mentee relationships; (2) Pre-observation meeting between MR, ME1 and ME2; (3) First observation meeting between MR and ME1; (4) Post-first observation meeting between MR and ME1; (5) First observation meeting between MR, ME1 as mentor and ME2; (6) Post-first observation meeting between MR, ME1 as mentor and ME2; (7) Second observation meeting between MR and ME1; (8) Second observation meeting between MR, ME1 as mentor and ME2; (9) Third observation meeting between MR, ME1 as mentor and ME2.

### Recording of meetings and data analysis

An effort was made to ensure that the recording of details was as complete as possible to allow constructive analysis of all mentor/mentee meetings.

Minutes of all meetings were recorded by MR during the meetings, presented to ME1 and ME2 as typed notes for consideration, and adjusted for accuracy, where necessary. These typed notes took the form of three columns, namely items for discussion, comments and action points. A reflective portfolio was also constructed by MR between September and December 2017, overseen by MT, as a further guide to analysis and with the intention of facilitating MR and ME1's mentoring during the study period of September-November 2017. It should be noted that learning opportunities experienced and shared by the mentoring group (outside of their own meetings) formed part of the recorded data for analysis.

## **3 Results and discussion**

The results presented and discussed here have arisen from individual and group reflection on the mentoring process and the mentoring experience. They are displayed under subheadings reflected in Table 1 under Assessment of benefits of either method.

	Dyadic	References for dyadic definitions	Proposed mentored mentoring model
Principles	Do no harm	Rhodes <i>et al.</i> (2009)	Do no harm
	Mentee driven	Cruz <i>et al.</i> (2015)	Mentee driven
	Confidential, open communication	Morgan & Rochford (2017)	Confidential, open communication
	Supportive professional behaviour	Morgan & Rochford (2017)	Supportive professional behaviour
	Constructive and positive	Morgan & Rochford (2017)	Constructive and positive
External support for mentoring	Mentor training (each time)	Nick <i>et al.</i> (2012)	Possibility of training within an advanced practice setting
Assessment of benefits of either method	Support for the mentee		Support for mentors and mentees
	Establishment of best practice in mentoring through experiential learning	Nick <i>et al.</i> (2012)	Establishment, continued improvement, and dissemination of best practice in mentoring through experiential learning
	Development of strategies for managing situations that arise through paired dialogue		Development of strategies for managing situations that arise through paired and group dialogue
	Improved communication	Eller <i>et al.</i> (2014)	Improved communication
	Improved career satisfaction and development	Ghosh & Reio (2013)	Improved career satisfaction and development
	Actualisation/facilitation of another person		Actualisation/facilitation of more than one other person
	Success dependent on compatibility of mentor and mentee	Jackson <i>et al.</i> (2003)	Likelihood of successful partnerships may be increased by having more than two persons present where needed
	Limits potential for collaborative interactions and more diverse skills	Higgins <i>et al.</i> (2007)	Possibility of extension from the head of the institution to the most junior members

### Analysis of support provided by previously-described models of mentoring and the newly-proposed model

There have been descriptions of many forms of mentoring. These have included informal and formal mentoring, group mentoring, peer mentoring and reciprocal mentoring, which are usefully defined in a Michigan State University paper (<https://www.adapp->

[advance.msu.edu/files\\_adapp-advance/content/Mentor%20Models%205-7-11.pdf](http://advance.msu.edu/files_adapp-advance/content/Mentor%20Models%205-7-11.pdf) ). None of these types of mentoring appear to describe the current model, which emerged as a result of the original dyadic relationship between MR and ME1 being followed by mentor training, and the addition of ME2 to the mentoring trio, eight months later. In this setting, ME2 gained access not only to her mentor, but also her mentor's mentor, and additional support was thereby provided over that which would have been available in a dyadic context (see Table 1). This model differed from group mentoring in having a mentor being mentored rather than having a mentee being mentored by more than one mentor. An analysis of the current model forms the basis for this paper, and which also includes an exploration of the benefits of mentor training for MR, which occurred some months after beginning the mentoring process with ME1. Management of mentoring activities in this case consisted of both individual and group meetings, as required. Both ME1 and ME2 had been mentored in previous institutions. Analyses of the mentoring process were conducted by the mentor/mentee trio, during and after the period of structured mentoring meetings.

ME2 says that

*...in my previous employments the mentor style would always have been a one to one format and so the value of the sessions very much depended on the relationship that you had with that person and the level of trust that there was between you both. The mentor was also always my manager and so there was not always the freedom to express yourself as you may wish, as the same person was responsible for my yearly appraisal and therefore my bonus. It was therefore difficult to admit if you were experiencing any struggles with your work or with certain personnel, as you wanted to give the best impression that you could. The same amount of time was allocated to the meeting, regardless of the particular challenges/issues that were ongoing at a specific time, or whether there was much to discuss. This sometimes led to a feeling that the purpose of the session was to meet a company objective, rather than being a facility where I could turn to my mentor for advice whenever needed.*

The selection of mentors and mentees in the current case evolved over the period of the study and resulted from the HOD having made the decision to ask MR to act as mentor on two successive occasions, to two new staff members. These events occurred because it was predicted by the HOD that each mentor/mentee pair would be suited to one another, which was reported to be the case, as was the trio that ensued. It is not possible in this paper to ascertain what would have happened had this not been the case.

ME2 states that

*...my mentor and my mentor's mentor had different backgrounds, experiences and outlooks, which was helpful. The fact that there were two mentors present meant that we could bounce ideas off each other and neither party tried to take the lead, allowing me to come to my own conclusions about a situation, while giving me the assurance that it was the right way to go.*

The provision of training during the mentoring process rather than at the beginning of it occurred as a consequence of MR having access to a mentoring module being delivered at that time.

MR states that

*...the provision of training and support from MT subsequent to mentoring ME1 and concurrent with the trio of my own, ME1 and ME2's interactions showed that professional training and support in mentoring are really transformative. What I tended to see as a problem-solving role before the mentor training gave way to a different approach through seeking to ask open, facilitative questions.*

According to Pawson (2004), workplace mentoring works most intensively when the most powerful and most experienced nurture and acknowledge the most competent and the most willing. In this case MR was in a senior (but not management) position, however; mentees had recently been the successful candidates selected for their respective positions, after interview. It was undeniably helpful that each of the three participants was either at a different stage of their career, or in a different role in the department.

MR says that

*...I know that our communications provided an illustration for not only myself but for the three of us of how the role of a newcomer on the staff evolves from being one of trying to cope with a heavy workload and everything being new, to one where a certain familiarity with one's role evolves and where constructive developments of oneself and one's roles are feasible.*

Pawson also says that even in the top drawer of corporate mentoring when the significantly powerful commune with highly motivated, the studies above indicate that such partnerships falter without a base in rapport, trust and mutual affinity (Pawson, 2004). This suggests that a careful selection of mentor/mentees is important. Having more than one person available to mentor a mentee has been suggested as being important (DeCastro *et al*, 2013) as the authors suggested (in a discussion of having multiple/group mentors) that it was improbable that one would find a single person who can fulfil the diverse mentoring needs of another individual. We suggest that our approach helps in this regard.

### **Reported reasons for a successful partnership within the current model**

The likelihood of successful partnerships may be increased by having more than two persons present where needed, simply from having a third perspective on a matter, once the fundamental motivation and affinity for the mentoring are sound. The mentoring group selected in this case focused on ME1 indirectly (primarily in the role of junior mentor) through the focus on ME2, and the authors feel that this worked more naturally and with less danger of competition than if there had been, for example, two senior mentors and one mentee or one mentor and two equally-placed mentees.

ME1 states that

...in a previous position, in industry, I was mentored by a peer who tended to see me as a competitor. The mentoring relationship was doomed to failure because I could not compete with my mentor and became disadvantaged by the relationship.

ME2 says that

...I felt that the sessions that we had in CIT were catered around my needs. As a new starter, we met frequently at first and then I was allowed time to explore my new role with the knowledge that I had the support of my mentor and mentor's mentor when I needed guidance or reassurance. It also really helped that there was no real conflict of interests in our roles and so the relationship between mentor and mentee was clear, which really helped build a trust between us.

### **Experiential learning in the current model**

The benefit of having increased learning opportunities for mentors and mentees through our current model over the more traditional dyadic approach is supported by Vygotsky's learning theory (Vygotsky, 1962), which states that we learn through our interactions and communications with others. The group provided multiple perspectives for consideration in our case, whether through observing shared dialogue between ME1 and ME2 or through the ensuing conversations between MR, ME1 and ME2 that were based on reflection and experiential learning. Dissemination of best practice arising from these interactions is favoured using this approach, which is listed also as a benefit in Table 1.

Further explorations of the benefits of having a triadic relationship between an established senior member of staff and two more junior members of staff are summarised in Table 1 and are based on the consensus opinion of the authors.

The more senior member of staff, MR, had experience and knowledge of the institution, having spent a number of years working there, unlike either of the other members of the group. Therefore, the passing on of the knowledge of MR might have been expected to increase the rate of learning for ME1 and ME2. There was, however, an element of reverse mentoring between ME1 and MR at the same time in bridging the gap between a greater level of both experience and autonomy (MR) and the unknowing of the new staff member (ME2), within a dynamic HEI environment.

### **Evolution of the current mentoring model**

The basis for the structured meetings that consisted of the three staff members was that the senior mentor attended as an observer unless asked to contribute to the meeting. Each of the three attendees reported that this was a learning opportunity. For MR, it was an opportunity to observe ME1 interacting with ME2, and it provided a chance to learn how to modify her own

approach, and to be able to discuss both actual and theoretical approaches to certain situations by the junior mentee. ME2 reported that it was a revelation to discover that the mentors were not necessarily confident of giving the correct response to a request for advice, and the mentee was present to observe a discussion between the two mentors when trying to find the best advice to suggest. Ultimately, this approach gave greater confidence in the decision that was made when advising the mentee and it provided affirmation for the junior mentor. Witnessing ME1 using MR as a sounding board increased the awareness that decisions are, or should be, context-driven, and that they are not necessarily straightforward. Ultimately, ME2 is mentoring students, mainly on a one-to-one basis, in the next step, which forms an extension of the current model.

Overall, from a mentoring point of view, the mentoring process was not primarily about finding answers for the mentee; the aim was to empower each mentee to find solutions for themselves. The group reported that there was more confidence in the outcome of discussions through the possibility of having a more balanced approach to problem-solving than would happen in a dyadic setting (thereby providing supporting evidence for this benefit listed in Table 1). A further benefit to these meetings was that the mentors benefited from being facilitated in assessing situations in a familiar (although dynamic) setting, through the eyes of the mentee. Ultimately, having more than two people present helped with the development of effective strategies by the mentee. Perhaps it should be mentioned that MR, ME1 and ME2 were all female, and it is not possible to ascertain here whether this was helpful during mentoring. It must be acknowledged that our proposed model can be more time-consuming than a straightforward dyadic model is likely to be, although it is possible that having the benefit of direct or indirect access through a third, fourth or subsequent party within the mentoring continuum might ultimately represent a better use of time through more effective resolution for the mentee.

The benefits of mentor training were explored during both scheduled meetings and in informal conversations among the group. MR, having experience of mentoring before, during and after mentor training, found that the training helped with taking a considered approach, and by asking open questions, rather than tending to jump in with advice. The open-question approach better facilitated the mentee, while also stimulating a more reflective state of mind in the mentor. Mentor training also provided a useful framework for having planned and recorded mentor-mentee meetings. The outcome from this practice included being better able to measure progress from both mentor and mentee's perspective and in being able to consider how the process might be improved upon during the series of structured meetings that took place. It was concluded by the group that mentored mentoring provides scope for

applied learning *in situ* and for advanced practice (as listed in Table 1, fourth column) being built directly from the experience of the senior mentor when the junior mentor is starting to mentor their mentee – experience that can be passed onwards in a mentoring continuum. Figure 2 provides a schematic diagram that encapsulates this thinking. The use of the word generation in the diagram reflects the evolution of a mentee to the role of mentor, and the arrows signify ongoing inter-connectivity between the participants who can either mentor or be mentored (not confined to dyads).

Aside from the structured meetings that included MR, ME1 and ME2, ME2 reported that she experienced a benefit in having access to MR on a mentee-driven basis. Within the mentoring trio, aside from the structured meetings listed, there was an understanding that a mentee or mentor was free to have dyadic rather than triadic meetings if that was felt to be the best approach in any given set of circumstances.

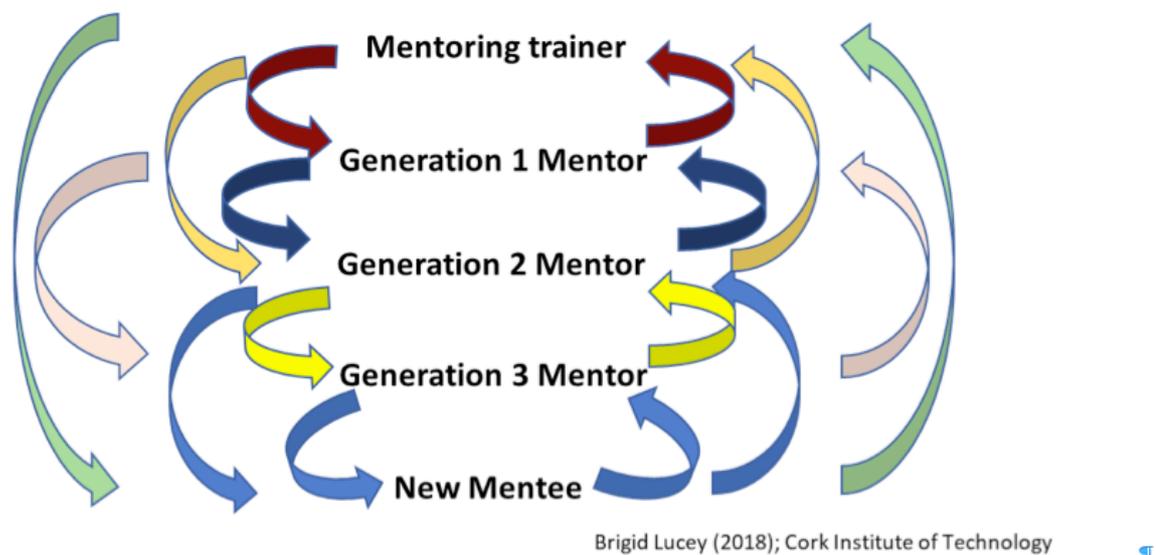


Figure 2. Model for staff development through indefinite-duration, inter-connected mentoring channels in a Higher Education Organisation

Overall, the benefits to the mentee included support in their professional role, and a sense of collegiality and personal support. It was felt that mentoring required empathy, and for empathy to be possible it is necessary to really understand the position of the mentee. In this regard, having MR and ME1 present together strengthened this understanding, thereby

assisting the mentoring process. In this case study, mentor training only came during the mentoring process, which allowed a direct comparison of MR's approach before and afterwards. The authors suggest that formal training in mentoring is very valuable in challenging the appropriateness of the mentor's behaviour when tending to try to fix problems for the mentee. It demonstrates the value of training in active rather than evaluative listening for the mentor, which is ultimately more empowering for the mentee.

#### **Facilitation of the mentee in the current model: a short case study**

During the mentoring process, one of the tasks undertaken by MR and ME1 was the facilitation of ME2 when she was applying for funding to aid the development of her role as placement co-ordinator. The application was successful, which prompted a discussion among MR and ME1 of the challenge within the role of mentor to act as facilitator for the good of the mentee alone, in this case when the funding application and award were most appropriately those of ME2. This was an illustration of the need for adherence to the principles of mentoring from the outset of the process, and an avoidance of any conflicts of interest, for example when each party could well have been in competition with one another, being each eligible to apply for funding from the same funding source. Both mentor training and mentored mentoring proved helpful in this regard. Mentoring in higher education has many of the elements of bringing out the best in the individuals involved if conducted in an ethically sound manner, being voluntary, collegial, trusting, constructive, professional and facilitating of others.

During this case study, MT was available to MR, and it was helpful to be able to call on additional advice. This further illustrates that a mentoring continuum automatically provides support to all participants (see also Table 1) when needed without requiring either long explanations or a request for confidentiality in the facilitation of a number of people. This contrasts with being limited to the facilitation of one individual as might be expected in a dyadic mentoring setting.

## **4 Conclusion and recommendations**

In conclusion, we propose the view that mentored mentoring provides a supportive, continuous model of mentoring, which theoretically might extend from the most senior to the most junior members of a workplace. This may differ from group mentoring in the sense of each mentee having access to generations of mentors and mentees that precede the current relationship. It has the potential to provide additional support at every level, and favours open communication among groups of employees. We suggest that mentor training is vital, and that training is likely to have a more long-term benefit with our model than when mentoring is

always dyadic. We support the previously-held views that mentoring may be time-consuming, and also that the mentor benefits as much as the mentee from participation.

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