



Establishing a Corporate Mentor Partner Program (CMPP) focusing on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) – considering addressing gender bias and equality

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Abstract

At Alliance Manchester Business School (AMBS) we piloted a new innovative mentoring program, the Corporate Mentor Partner Program (CMPP). Several factors contributed to this initiative, with one of the main drivers being that certain groups of graduates, females on a specific program, did not progress their career as well as expected and were lagging their peers after graduation. In the CMPP pilot, we worked with individual organisations, corporate partners, on a specialised and individually tailored mentoring program, making sure we could target and match specific student groups and aligning this with the ethos and CSR goals of the corporate partner organisation, particularly focus on gender equality.

The mentoring would no longer just be between the mentor and the mentee, but additional stakeholders would benefit such as the University and other external organisations. An online mentoring platform was carefully selected. Student groups were invited to engage with the CMPP. The article discusses the background of the program, how students were identified and engaged, selection of corporate partners, why and how CSR played a role, the benefits to all stakeholders, criteria for an online platform, but also the challenges and learnings that needs to be taken into consideration should a larger scale program be established. Key learnings from the pilot are to consider clear rules of engagement, consider the methods of matching carefully and be sensitive to cultural differences, consider target groups (females or further inclusivity) as well as having clear timelines for maximum impact.

Keywords: Mentoring, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), student support, female, careers

Background and drivers for mentoring

At Alliance Manchester Business School (AMBS) it was identified from a post-graduation survey that certain groups of students, Asian females studying on specific MSc programs, were lagging their peers in employment and salary post graduation.

The issue gained the attention of the female board members of the University Advisory board. The University of Manchester has a wide and varied career service offering, an extended focus on equality and inclusivity and many other support services and initiatives to promote inclusivity and equality. However, at this particular occasion, it was clear that something else was needed to try to support the identified group. An all-female working group was created, including members of the University Advisory board, Head of AMBS, Head of Executive Education and the Employability Lead of AMBS.

Millennials

The idea of a mentoring program was identified. While it is recognised that mentoring programs are not new, the perceived importance of mentoring relationships is increasing. Since 2020, millennials are the largest group making up the workforce and can be seen to have a distinctive approach and attitude to work-life balance. For example, a study by Intelligence Group (a division of the Creative Artist Agency), presented by Kantor and McKeogh (2015), provide the insights that 72% of millennials would like to be their own boss, but if they must work for a boss, 79% would want them act as a coach or a mentor. Insider (Giang, n.d.) discusses a survey by PGI from 2013, where they state that 75% of millennials stated that they deem mentors crucial for success.

Looking at recruitment, Kantor and McKeogh (2015) also found that more than 60% of graduate students listed mentoring as a criterion for selecting an employer after graduation, and that retention rates have been much higher for mentees and mentors (72% and 69%) than for employees not involved in mentoring programs (49%). Mentoring is therefore seen as to essential success.

Establishing a Corporate Partner Mentor Program focusing on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) – considering addressing gender bias and equality

Previous mentoring programs

There have been mentoring programs in the past at AMBS, but these have generally been more focused on the goodwill of alumni giving back to mentor a broad group of students without a specific focus on gender or minority. The previous programs have focused solely on the individuals involved in the mentoring relationship. There has not necessarily been a “mentor/mentee” community or wider engagement with external organisations. To achieve the desired outcome of breaking the bias and supporting a specific group, the aforementioned female demographic, we had to think differently of how we would be able to run a successful mentoring program. This led to the idea and setup of the Corporate Mentor Partner Program (CMPP) pilot.

The Stakeholders

AMBS would work with individual organizations on specialized and tailored mentoring programs. As such we could make sure we could target and match specific student groups, aligning this with the expertise of external organizations. There was extensive interest and willingness to support female students and students from a widening participation background supporting the #breakthebias campaign that was running in association with International Women’s Day 2022.

The organizations selected to take part in the initial CMPP pilot were selected by the Employability Lead of AMBS, based on her network and external relations. The three organizations chosen for the pilot had some previous links with the University, but were open for new areas of engagement to strengthen the links with the University. The organizations that took part in the pilot was BNY Mellon, Siemens and Page Group.

Historically mentoring programs have focused on the benefits for the mentee and possibly the mentor and the benefits they can derive from engaging in a mentoring program. However, with the AMBS CMPP program, additional stakeholders could be served; the corporate partners (the external organizations) and the University (the institution).

Benefits for mentor and mentees

The benefits for the mentee in a mentoring relationship are well established. It can help them increase their confidence, set, and achieve goals, develop connections, and provide guidance and inspiration. The benefits for the mentor are recognized as well; it can improve communication and management skills, create a sense of making a difference, prompt reflection and possibly a change in behaviour, and help them develop their own personal goals. (mentorloopadmin, 2017) (Indeed, n.d.)

Benefits for the University

For the university, the CMPP supports and develops students beyond the ‘regular’ support services and facilities. The CMPP helps the university to build and strengthen external relations with potential employers for the students. It also opens up opportunities for Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) and research collaborations, as well as access to guest speakers and potential for tailored corporate programs.

Benefits for the Corporate Partner organisation

There are four main benefits for the Corporate Partner to engage with the CMPP at AMBS.

Firstly, it provides direct access to a potential talent pool. Secondly, it supports development of staff internally. Mentoring of students shows engagement with leadership development, increased knowledge share, development of emotional intelligence, improved culture/transfer of culture and, perhaps most importantly, direct access to a potential talent pool for recruitment. (Wilson & Elman, 1990) (*PLD / Blog*, n.d.). Thirdly, it created opportunities for further areas of collaboration, for example research projects. Fourth, by engaging with the CMPP, it supports many organisations explicit CSR goals and priorities.

Corporate Social Responsibility - CSR

What makes the CMPP special is the focus on working in alignment with an external organisation’s interests, strategy, and goals. In the past many corporations’ goals have been to maximise shareholder value and profit. Today most companies have other items very high up on the agenda, such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

Many organisations have explicit CSR goals. Some align with the UN2030 agenda 17 goals, and some have expanded on these (*Take Action for the Sustainable Development Goals - United Nations Sustainable Development*, n.d.). For many organisations, goals on the CSR agenda include: access to education; diversity and inclusion; community initiatives; empowering minority groups; good health and wellbeing; gender equality; and volunteering.

Establishing a Corporate Partner Mentor Program focusing on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) – considering addressing gender bias and equality

The organisations selected as partners for the CMPP have explicit goals focusing on gender equality (UN Goal 5). It is hard for a CSR aware organisation to not engage with the CMPP at AMBS. The overall benefits for the organisation are considerable, but one large motivator is their own fulfilment of CSR goals and addressing gender equality.

Running the program, including finding a suitable online platform and matching

To set up and run a mentoring program is time consuming. Due to the limited time allocation to the role of employability lead (10%), it was clear that an online platform would be needed to set up in order to manage and evaluate a mentor program. It was also naturally driven by the fact that we were in the middle of a pandemic. A review followed of suitable mentoring platforms. It came down to a discussion between platform “A” and platform “B”. It was important that the platform had the following features:

- the ability to set up and run several programs at different times and of different sizes as we would have different companies and student programs involved,
- simple sign up,
- effective and easy matching,
- effective monitoring tool,
- prompts,
- easy reporting,
- user-friendly and easy to use for both mentors and mentees.

Platform “A” was selected for the first-year pilot. This was instrumental in setting up and running the pilot program, but also a very steep learning curve. For the year two pilot, another platform, platform “B” has been selected for trial. The reasons for this are to make sure we have explored several platforms, before committing to a solution for sustained long term use. It is instrumental that there is scalability, but through the initial pilot, we have also learnt that certain functions are more critical (for example, integration and firewalls, filters etc) and others are less critical (for example, some reporting features, configurations etc).

Engaging students

AMBS has over 6,000 students. To be able to get an overview of the student body, we created a ‘catalogue’ of our programs in AMBS. For each program we outlined, numbers, gender, and any other available demographics data for the year. This included undergraduate programs and postgraduate Master’s programs. The catalogue was shared with the corporate partners, who then gave views on which groups of students they wished to mentor. All rules and regulations of Data Privacy were followed. The partner organisations were also informed about the drivers behind the program and the particular focus on gender equality and support. The organisations were very co-operative and keen to be supporting specific student groups.

For the CMPP Pilot, we set up six separate programs. In the initial selection process, females in their second year of study, as well as females on MSc level, were encouraged to apply for the mentoring program. Although we specifically set out to support a female demographic, males were not discouraged to apply, and we had numerous male applicants. In total, 63% of all mentees identified as females and 55% were Asian. This is encouraging as the origination of the program came from an identified need to support Asian females. In addition, we had about 50% more mentees applying than we had mentors we could allocate.

Matching

The matching of mentors and mentees has previously mainly been a manual and administrative process. Getting the right match is key for the mentoring relationship to flourish (How To Match Mentors and Mentees | Guider, n.d.).

Each of the programs used a different type of matching. This was to make sure we could evaluate how the different type of matching worked and what was most effective.

The platform selected offered four types of matching;

1. *Manual matching* where the administrator matches up participants.
2. *Self-select* where mentors and mentees scroll through the program and reach out to a mentor or mentee signed up to their program asking for a match. It requires some initiative from the participants and requires them to do their own search in the program and actively reach out.
3. *Self-select with recommendation* a self-select option but with the system providing some recommendations based on the input from the sign up form. The mentor or mentee will get 3-5 recommendations, but still need to reach out themselves asking to set up the mentoring relationship. We thought this would be the most suitable, but very few students actually reached out to a mentor. This may potentially be attributable to cultural differences (Marketing & Warburton, 2019)
4. *Smart match* which is triggered on a specific date by the administrator. The participants will be automatically matched based on their goals. The advantage of this is that matching happens automatically and on a specific date. However, the

Establishing a Corporate Partner Mentor Program focusing on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) – considering addressing gender bias and equality

disadvantage is that it can take quite some time before matching can take place (if there is a delay to get participants signed up) and it can cause disengagement from participants, not knowing if they will be matched.

There was no specific requirement for female-female mentoring relationships. According to Construction Executive (*Mentoring Can Provide Contractors With Sustainable Benefits*, n.d.), a focus on having formal mentoring programs, in contrast to informal mentoring programs, is far more efficient for championing diversity and inclusivity. This is because in an informal mentoring program or arrangement, the mentor and mentee can tend to match on the basis of their shared likeness of similarities.

Learnings so far and conclusions

Post the pilot program, the AMBS Employability lead undertook a full evaluation of the program which included participant surveys pre- and post- program, complemented with individual interviews with program co-ordinators, mentors and mentees. The internal report produced also provided recommendation for future programs. The key learnings identified concerned:

- The need for clear rules of engagement/contracting to be established. We had mentors that could not commit because of workload. We also had students who did not engage and who possibly did not realise the opportunity that was being presented to them to engage in developmental mentoring.
- Matching capacity. We had to recruit more mentors during the program as mentees kept signing up. We had to trigger automatic matching because students were too 'shy' to reach out to 'senior people'. Using a mentoring platform is a must to be able to run an effective program, as it helps deal with the resource requirements of running a formal mentoring programme and is time saving. It is also easier to monitor engagement and progress through a dedicated platform. However, what we have also learnt is that the human touch still needs to be there, the possibility to change, the possibility to be flexible, the possibility to encourage and to be re-assuring.
- Target groups. It would be helpful to be able to have an even more focused approach to support certain student groups, for example the female demographic we sought to support. However, there needs to be a consideration for equality and inclusion and ensuring that seeking to support a particular demographic is not to the detriment of others.
- Clear timelines. As our initiative was a pilot, there was a delay in sign-ups, matching, launching and ongoing monitoring, which caused confusion and disengagement among some participants. Linking with clear rules of engagement is key.

To conclude from our experiences to date, from having identified a need to support gender equality and provide support particularly Asian females, the CMPP managed to engage and align goals and agendas of global corporations to act on a local level. We are also left with the outlook that mentoring can and should benefit everyone at different levels of context. It is no longer just about individual mentees and mentors, it is about organisations and their change with a focus on inclusivity, equality and diversity.

Biographies

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