

WHY SOCIAL MOBILITY MATTERS: E-MENTORING IN LAW, A STRATEGIC PLAN

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Introduction

In recent years our economy has come to rely increasingly on service-based and professional employment. In the future, the UK's economic advantage may increasingly lie in knowledge-based services, the very sectors where professionals are concentrated. The final report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions concluded in 2009 that:

"The country's future prosperity and growth - its business and exports - may in the future be underpinned by the professions".

Unleashing Aspiration: The Final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, July 2009, p16.

A central component therefore, of any public policy agenda concerned with the enhancement of social mobility - is how best to widen access to the professions.

Undoubtedly, it is for each individual to determine how to make the most of the opportunities that present themselves in life. Choices concerning individual career paths inevitably involve trade-offs, which aspiring students will in turn navigate in ways that suit their own personal circumstances. Significantly however, the presentation of quality opportunities lies frequently beyond the individual's control (*Unleashing Aspiration: The Final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009*)

Gaining admission to university to study law is extremely competitive. For students from a non-privileged background it can be difficult to gain the support, knowledge and insight necessary to make a successful application to read law. This contribution to the Good Practice Guide charts the strategic planning and launch of an e-mentoring scheme, which aims to respond to the Final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, and its bitterly severe condemnation of the increasingly elitist 'closed shop' mentality which pervades admission to the legal profession.

The Aston Law e-mentoring scheme aims to support individuals from non-privileged backgrounds in navigating a career in law; whilst at the same time allowing our own law students to augment leadership skills which will further enhance their employability. This project envisages the provision of a lasting human contact, someone that the mentees can turn to for advice along the way. As the mentees career path develops so too will the mentors, providing current advice and long term support. The project has a broader and more ambitious 'citizenship and community' learning objective which seeks to position mentoring firmly within teaching, learning and assessment

The objective of this contribution to the Good Practice Guide is to illustrate the usefulness of a logical strategic planning process to the most modest educational leadership and management activities.

The starting position for this strategic planning process has been the development and articulation of a vision and mission for the project. Devised in consultation with the mentors and the Aston Law Staff. It can be articulated as follows:

Vision

'To enthuse, inspire and support students from a wide diversity of backgrounds to aspire to and succeed at career in law.'

Mission/Purpose

'To erode gender, cultural and knowledge barriers to participation though developing an e-mentoring scheme which develops mentors and mentees'.

Success Criteria

The first part of this contribution outlines the agreed success criteria for the project. These have been devised once again in consultation with the mentors and academic staff at Aston Law. A key aspect of this strategic plan has been to encourage, and enhance vesting in the project by the stakeholders. The success criteria are the criteria by which the project will be evaluated and assessed at strategic points in the project's lifetime.

Objective	Description	Success Criteria
1	To recruit Aston Law e-mentors who are committed to its vision and mission.	a) to recruit a minimum of 5 e-mentors from the LL.B. first year. b) recruits should be representative re the WP (Widening Participation) agenda
2	To recruit a manageable and sufficient number of e-mentees who meet the qualifying criteria for the scheme.	a) to advertise the scheme to target schools/colleges which objectively meet the WP agenda. b) to recruit a minimum of 20- maximum of 30 mentees for the project.
3	To develop in partnership with its stakeholders a vision and mission for the project.	a) to develop a vision and mission for the project. b) to ensure that this development takes place in partnership and consultation with the team and other stakeholders.
4	To be in full compliance at all times with the universities child protection policy.	a) to ensure all e-mentors and staff have completed full CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) disclosure. b) to ensure that forums are fully moderated and compliant with ACPP (Aston Child Protection Policy and Procedure). c) To disseminate and present the policy to all e-mentors.
5	To train the e-mentors in using the BrightJournals™ software.	a) all mentors to receive an induction to the programme/software. b) ensure that e-mentors are aware of the technical support available. c) to produce a training pack/induction pack for future e-mentor intakes.
6	To develop a marketing strategy in line with the objectives of the project  	a) branding of Aston Law materials and AU materials with AimHigher and BrightJournals logos b) AU marketing representative on the team c) Development of webpages and linked websites
7	Obtain consents for a longitudinal study into the effectiveness of such projects.	a) to consult with Ethical Approval Board regarding consent forms & Data protection. b) To disseminate information about the nature and purpose of the collection of information and the consent.
8	To investigate sustainable funding, sponsorship/partnership.	a) collate information of potential funding streams and sponsorship to ensure sustainability
9	To devise and deliver activities in partnership with mentors and mentees which enthuse and inspire their goal to study/practice law.	a) to devise engaging activities which enthuse potential students of law b) to devise activities in partnership with the mentors c) to collate information on the impact of such activities

Plan

There is an important caveat with regard to the plan that follows, and what might appear to be sparsity in terms of evidential criterion. This is a conscious and deliberate omission to enable review and reflection of the impact, and achievement of goals which are critical to the success of this project. The focus of the justification section in this plan will therefore be to prioritise those success criterion that are fundamental to the project. Allowing 'what matters' to be evaluated within the confines of the time and resources available. The preference being consideration and reflection on formative evidence, that which can be used to shape, modify and enhance the project.

Success Criteria	Evidence	Justification	Timeframe	Completed
1		a)	01/11	✓ ✓
2		a)	12/10	✓ ✓
3a 3b	Minutes of meeting Self reporting evidence	Factual quantitative evidence that activities have been produced. Process orientated, qualitative evidence needs to be obtained from the mentors to determine the extent to which they have worked in partnership to devise the vision and mission for the project. This can be obtained through a short questionnaire.	02/11	✓
4	CRB Enhanced Disclosure - confirmation Moderators reports Documents	Two mentors partially completed disclosure - OH to chase.	02/11 05/11	✓
5		a)	02/11	✓ ✓ ✓
6			03/11	a)
7a 7b	Meeting notes & associated documentation Research methodology	In keeping with institutional agendas the foundations for a longitudinal study into the effectiveness and efficiency of this initiative will be undertaken at this stage of the leadership project. It is imperative to note the limitations of the term effective (Scott, 1997). Internal processes which impact on effectiveness of the project need to be considered in terms of: economy, efficiency and effectiveness as performance measures.	05/11	
8		a)	05/11	a)
9a 9b 9c	Documentation in relation to determined activities - curriculum; teaching plans & objectives Self reporting, qualitative (MENTORS) - the extent to which the mentors devised and delivered activities in partnership Self reporting (MENTEES)	Quantitative Criterion 9c is also qualitative. Short interviews recorded on FLIP cameras- Did activities enthuse and inspire mentees to study law? This should feed into the longitudinal study which will chart participants' success obtaining a place to study law and entrance into the profession (quantitative). The study should also consider the extent to which the participants feel the experience was beneficial (qualitative) (or not!) This methodology needs to be reviewed and developed with CLIPP.	05/11 Review and reflection of data	

Contextual factors: Food for Thought

This section of this strategic plan introduces issues related to the contexts within which Aston University (AU) and this project will operate. Educational institutions are far from homogeneous entities, they exhibit their own internal cultures, objectives, structures and processes. External contexts by contrast reflect global, national and local issues in relation to political, economic and social forces that impact on the HE sector. In terms of this project in particular it includes the increasingly competitive and consumerist environment in which AU finds itself. These contextual factors are multifaceted and fluid, their increasingly permeable boundaries can make definitive categorization of external and internal contexts challenging (Anderson *et al* 2003). In a time of unprecedented change in the Higher Education (HE) sector it is also necessary to consider the 'temporal context', that is the context in which AU might find itself within, in the very near future.

Potential Constraint: Images of Higher Education

This potential constraint is particularly pertinent when considering the work of Leithwood *et al* 1999, who offer three images of the future of educational leadership. The first of which is the notion of the educational organization as central to the community - as an organization which demonstrates 'integrative values' and 'motivating values'. The second image promulgated by Leithwood *et al* is the conceptualization of an educational organization as a 'high reliability organization' subject to audits, inspections, and arguably evidence based practice.

The difficulties of assessment with reference to the success of this project become more pronounced when one considers that assessment terminology is inherently value laden and subject to interpretation. Bottery, 2000 highlights the need for leaders and managers to be clear about the perspective that they are using to view or assess a situation; different stakeholders - assess the efficacy or desirability of any given approach or outcome differently. This e-mentoring project is likely to require active and extensive boundary management to maintain the balance between efficacy in terms of resource allocation and disproportionate resource depletion in order to achieve a 'greater good' in line with the vision and mission of the project.

Potential Constraint: Issues of Motivation and Reward

The second potential challenge for this project lies in the nature and intensity of our own undergraduate programme. This project utilizes our own undergraduate students as mentors for aspirational students in Further Education (FE). The LL.B. Law with Management students are undertaking one of the most challenging qualifying law degrees in the country. Their time and commitment is at a premium; it is therefore crucial to embed some sort of award or academic credit for our mentors, this will act as a motivator and reward, which will help sustain commitment to the project. Linking mentoring with some sort of award or credit may also encourage mentors to reflect on their mentoring, identifying and articulating what they have developed and gained from the experience, thereby enhancing their employability.

Potential Constraint: De-institutionalizing trends

There is a pervasive belief that our society must become a 'learning society' this has led to burgeoning academic literature on the need for education to develop a more person-centered approach. This necessarily involves the development of skills such as collaborative working (Dalín and Rust, 1996) and a key skill, problem solving (Bentley, 1998). To respond to the reality of modern work modes, it is argued that there is a need for greater dispersed leadership within organizations to allow individuals the opportunity to problem solve within agreed criteria. If AU's students are to be able to respond to this changing and dynamic environment they need to experience problem solving and leadership activities throughout their education. Importantly they need to clearly see it modeled in their academic achievements. It is hoped that this e-mentoring scheme will go some way to addressing this contextual expectation. Indeed it might be cautiously submitted, that equipping students with these skills and attributes could form part of the criteria by which an AU is judged to be an organization of 'high reliability' in much the same way as we are judged by other outputs today.

Potential Constraint: Funding and Sustainability

The integrity of this e-mentoring project will be harmed if insufficient resources are allocated to the management of the project. There is a need to link this project with AU's core strategy for WP in order to achieve sustainability. Sustainability may require multiple income/funding streams which may be more easy to access because of the duplicitous nature of this project. The project has strong linkages to AU's employability agenda and its commitment to work-based learning. It is submitted that in a climate of increasingly high student expectations, employability discourse will penetrate the organizational boundary creating a generative/replicative dimension which is highly conducive to organizational change and sustainability (Dimmock and Walker, 2000).

Strategic Leadership and Management

The second stage of our launch strategy has been an exploration of a number of aspects in relation to strategic development, leadership and management. The strategic development model proposed by Johnson and Scholes, 2002 has been helpful in identifying the complexity of the developmental process for this project and its interconnectedness with wider institutional strategies and policies. This three stage process involves: understanding the strategic position; making strategic choices and finally putting the strategy into action. The model highlights the reality that although I plan to adopt a leadership role in this activity; my role and ability to shape institutional strategy is limited! It is hoped that the dovetailing /'piggybacking' this project with wider school and institutional strategic aims will mitigate this limitation and help augment a 'united commitment to the aims of the project', by creating a 'strong sense of shared ownership and involvement' (MacGilchrist et al., 1997, p236).

In this context it has been important to note that a number of existing AU institutional strategies which impact on the e-mentoring project, have not always followed a logical planning process and trajectory. As such, resource constraints for the WP agenda and shifting contexts have created gaps and overlaps which at times give the impression of 'piecemeal and insufficient strategic focus' (Weindling, 1997), this has presented challenges for the planning and launch of this project. In particular with reference to how this, and other outreach projects can feed into our admissions policy which demands exceptional academic qualifications form the very cohort of students likely to face barriers to attainment.

Rational approaches to organizational strategy are both necessary and important, but they fall short of sufficient. In order to make sense of the complexities of organizational life here at AU and the impact of the rapidly changing contextual factors, this project has needed to draw on alternative perspectives which acknowledge the bounded rationality of organizational decision making. As Mintzberg points out 'smart strategists appreciate that they cannot be smart enough to think through everything in advance' (Mintzberg, 1987). A core feature of our strategic plan has been therefore to allow for evolutionary organic development as contexts and circumstances change (Fullan, 2001).

This strategic plan for organizational improvement is necessarily complex and long-term. Any planned organizational change involve alterations to the way that we do things, which-necessarily involves instability, uncertainty and friction. In short only by putting this project into action, and working through the challenges as they occur will crystallization of the aims and objectives of the e-mentoring project take root. It is reassuring to know that change and processes outcomes can be legitimately ambiguous and unpredictable, this insight has allowed the teams resources and efforts to be focused on coping strategies (Louis and Miles, 1992).

Acknowledging the importance of my role in fostering a positive culture with reference to this project, logically lead to a consideration of the challenges faced in sustaining positive change. It is likely that there will likely be a number of significant tensions for the leadership and management of this project, in terms of balancing competing external and internal accountabilities. It seems reasonably clear that the relative success of this project may rely on the ability of the e-mentoring leadership team to cultivate a culture of self-evaluation linked to ongoing organizational improvement and broader institutional strategy objectives.

This project must therefore be defined and measured both in terms of its goals and outcomes and importantly its effectiveness in terms of process - the quality of the educational and mentoring experience that it provides for our own students and the mentees. Gray, offers a 3 stage questioning process which encompasses outcomes and goals (Gray, 1993). As applied to this project they may be:

1. Are the mentees achieving above average success in applying to study law/Are the mentors developing above average transferable employability skills?
2. Are the mentees satisfied with the mentoring experience/ Are the mentors satisfied with the quality of the mentoring experience?
3. Have the mentors and mentees formed a vital relationship with a mentor and or the subject/profession?

As sustainability and funding have been identified in the previous section as potential constraints, the effectiveness of this project and the leadership of it, might be measured in terms of the projects ability to evolve and adapt to changing contexts and environments (Goldring, 1997). As sustainability requires resources and funding it is important that the leadership team are able to mobilize and stream resources.

Reflection on our strategic plan has been useful in terms of identifying gaps or lost opportunities for the dissemination of findings and approaches. Whilst the leadership team feel it is important not to overstate the usefulness of findings and to acknowledge the cultural limitations to a blueprint dissemination; discussions throughout the the development process pointed to the innovative nature of this project and its usefulness to other subunits, schools and institutions. As such a key feature of our strategic planning process has been the integration of research and dissemination into the projects developmental strategy.

Final Thoughts

This contribution is by no means a comprehensive strategy, plan and reflection. It has been offered as an exemplar of the usefulness of the strategic planning process in an educational improvement and leadership context. The process, feedback from stakeholders, and the articulation of our project's aims and objectives has been invaluable in contextualizing and internalizing the benefits of knowledge and understanding in the field of educational leadership and management.

Fundamentally, it is one response by staff and students at Aston Law to the important role the professions play in economic and civic life, and one potential medium by which Aston University can play a key role in unlocking social mobility in the UK.

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