Monitoring and Evaluating Business Mentoring: Towards a Research and Evaluation Toolkit to Measure Impact

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This paper presents a Research and Evaluation Toolkit (RET) which has applicability to mentoring programmes in all sectors and organizational contexts. The RET offers a practical guide for human resource development practitioners engaged in evaluation of learning and development programmes and more specifically, mentoring.

The RET was a key outcome of a global 2.5-year impact evaluation project with Youth Business International and Middlesex University Business School, evaluating the impact of volunteer business mentoring on under-served young entrepreneurs and their business ventures. This paper brings to the forefront the importance of integrating a measurement and evaluation strategy from the initial mentoring programme design phase and ongoing management.

Despite the growing number of survey reports and studies that highlight the importance of this aspect of mentoring programme design and management, measurement and evaluation continues to be one of the most challenging areas. As such, this paper contributes to our understanding concerning the role and effectiveness of ongoing monitoring and evaluation in relation to demonstrating the impact of human resource development interventions and provides a practical approach for practitioners to develop and enhance their evaluation strategy and methods.

Key words: research and evaluation, business mentoring, impact, toolkit

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present a Research and Evaluation Toolkit (RET) developed specifically for the purpose of assisting Mentoring Programme Managers in any organizational context to facilitate the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of their mentoring programmes. In doing so, we hope that practitioners and academics engaged in mentoring programme design, implementation, and evaluation may be able to benefit from the overarching approach, synergizing theory and practice through the application of a practical toolkit which contains a number of specific resources designed to be sufficiently flexible to be adapted to different contextual setting.

The paper begins with an introduction to the practice of mentoring, followed by an overview of our research case, Youth Business International (YBI). We identify the challenges presented

by programme measurement and evaluation and provide an outline of a current framework supporting mentoring programme design, implementation and evaluation — the International Standards in Mentoring and Coaching Programmes which informed the development of the RET.

Mentoring Practice

In this paper, the research lens is focused specifically on monitoring and evaluating the impact of volunteer business mentoring to enable the development and improvement of mentoring programme practice. This was highlighted in the research findings as an area of significant challenge in the mentoring process.

There is an abundance of theory and knowledge to inform and support the design, development and evaluation of good mentoring programme practice (Haddock-Millar, 2017). In 2016 the European Mentoring and Coaching Council developed and launched the International Standards for Mentoring and Coaching Programmes (ISMCP); an independent accreditation awarded to organizations designing, delivering, and evaluating mentoring and/or coaching programmes either 'in-house' or externally. Within this framework, a core standard is the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the programme.

In 2016, the *Art of Mentoring* surveyed over 50 private sector companies and 70 associations in Australia, USA and Canada to conduct a benchmarking exercise of international company mentoring programmes. The focus of the survey was to understand how programmes were designed, conducted, evaluated and resourced; identify key success factors and what gets in the way of successful implementation. As with many other studies of this type, the overall conclusion was that "without a clear structure, mentor/mentee training, ongoing progress checks and post programme evaluations the potential rewards will not be achieved" (Art of Mentoring, 2016, p. 9). Included in the study report's "top tips" are the need to "measure success and report on ROI … this is essential in gaining and retaining stakeholder buy-in and the resources necessary to run the mentoring programme properly" (p. 9).

There is limited research on the evaluation of the impact of mentoring (Stewart & Rigg, 2011). Despite the growing number of survey reports that highlight the importance of this aspect of mentoring programme design and management, measurement and evaluation continues to be one of the most challenging areas for both individuals in programme management positions and researchers. From an impact measurement perspective, mentoring literature and empirical studies have been criticized for the narrow focus on findings and outcomes (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007). The indications are that the most effective and insightful forms of evaluation incorporate case study and highly qualitative approaches which can assess mentoring processes, in addition to hard and soft outcomes, including impacts such as confidence building (Wood et al., 2012; Sanyal, 2017) and entrepreneurial learning (Cope & Watts, 2000; Newey & Zahra, 2009). A single data collection point is a deeply inadequate method to enable the evaluation of mentoring relationships, whereas a longitudinal approach facilities analysis over time (Cull, 2006). This research case study conducted over two years attempted to address the gaps in existing research by evaluating mentoring relationships over a twelve to eighteen month period of time to assess multidimensional outcomes and determine construct validity and relevance (Janssen et al., 2015; Ragins & Verbos, 2007). The paper focuses on presenting the RET — a key outcome of the research project — designed to provide a pragmatic resource which mentoring programme managers and their evaluation team can use to support the ongoing and summative evaluation of their activities.

Research Case

In November 2015, YBI, a global network of independent non-profit initiatives helping young under-served young entrepreneurs to start up and grow their own business, commissioned Middlesex University to conduct a longitudinal study to understand "what works, where and why" in relation to business mentoring for young entrepreneurs, both in terms of their business start-up and development, but also their personal development and entrepreneurial journey. The research was undertaken by a group of academic practitioners in the Middlesex University Business School (MUBS) who specialize in mentoring, coaching and leadership development and the Centre for Enterprise and Economic Development Research (CEEDR) who specialize in entrepreneurship and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

When the research project commenced towards the end of 2015, the YBI Network comprised 46 independent, non-profit initiatives or 'members', spanning 42 different countries, from low to high income countries, and in five global regions. These include the Americas; Sub-Saharan Africa; Asia and Oceania; Middle East and North Africa; and Europe. By the beginning of 2018, the community had expanded to a global network of 50 member organizations collaborating to support young people to start and grow their own business, creating jobs and strengthening communities. The YBI global network is facilitated by a London-based Network Team in the United Kingdom and Bogota, Colombia, which co-ordinates and leads global activity. It has responsibility for driving network growth and quality, including through the delivery of capacity development services to members — thus combining global experience with local delivery expertise. The aim is to encourage under-served youth enterprise start-up and development, delivered by a consistent high quality service that is continually learning and improving across the network and is inclusive to all types of youth entrepreneur. Members provide integrated support to under-served youth entrepreneurs, which typically include volunteer business mentoring, business education and other business development services, combined in many cases with provision and/or facilitation of finance (generally loans). YBI members adapt this support to the needs and opportunities in their local context, working in partnership with governments, businesses, and multilateral and civil-society organizations.

We briefly describe the nature of the research undertaken. This was a consultancy piece of research, therefore the team adopted a pragmatic approach, largely influenced by the organizational needs and requirements within a specific framework, budget, and timescale. The overriding orientation was to develop research which was of value to YBI, their key stakeholders and the wider community, ultimately driven by the desire to raise the standards in mentoring practice across the globe. The research team utilised a longitudinal mixed method case study approach. This enabled the in-depth examination of eight network members and the practice of volunteer business mentoring (VBM) within its real-world context. The research triangulated evidence between three large quantitative surveys for network member, mentoring programme managers, and mentoring programme participants, including mentees and mentors, followed by smaller-scale qualitative in-depth interviews with mentees, mentors, and key stakeholders. Overall, combining Phase 1 and Phase 2, the research team recorded 1,654 survey responses and conducted 272 interviews.

Without exception, the research findings demonstrated that business mentoring is addressing substantial barriers and is having a significant impact on mentees' personal and professional development, in addition to assisting their business performance. Mentoring played an 'accelerator' and 'escalator' role; supporting young entrepreneurs to move from concept through

to established trading and growth more quickly and at increased scale. The effectiveness of the support received improved considerably from Phase 1 to Phase 2. The findings conclusively suggest that business mentoring is a win-win scenario, offering low cost support and significant improvement to business financing and subsequent performance.

However, the key challenges identified in the research include the continued resourcing of the mentoring programme and ongoing measurement and review of the mentoring relationships, personal, professional and business related outcomes. The YBI research report (YBI, 2018, p. 31) highlights that "evaluation is key but hard to do". All respondents in the case study confirmed that regular review and evaluation of the mentoring programme is essential to continually evolve and improve the mentoring programme. However, overall mentoring programme managers raised a number of concerns around the capacity and capability of the mentoring team. The research highlights that the mentoring programme evaluation strategy and approach should be included in the initial design process and continually updated to ensure that both processes and outputs are measured at both the programme and relationship level. The research team has attempted to address the issue of on-going evaluation and impact of mentoring faced by most mentoring programme managers through creation of a RET accompanied by an online webinar series. This was developed by the research team specifically for the network members to support the ongoing evaluation of their volunteer business mentoring programmes. It is hoped that the Toolkit will address one of the most significant challenges, at the same time providing capability support and professional development.

The Toolkit

The overall purpose of the RET is to provide a practical resource which mentoring programme managers and their evaluation team can use to support the ongoing and summative evaluation of their activities (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Purpose of the Toolkit

The RET begins with a number of preliminary design considerations and questions. This helps provide a framework for mentoring programme managers to reflect on their evaluation needs and then drill down into specific areas including the budget and timescale, what kind of output/report the organization wishes to produce and how the outputs will be used and by who, planning the evaluation, collecting evidence, and telling the story. These are important questions which help mentoring programme managers to think about the audience and end outcome before embarking on any research. Furthermore, the questions help programme managers prepare for the process of design and carefully work through each step in the research process. The RET contains a number of 'How to' Guides and covers seven related areas (see Figure 2):

Introduction to the toolkit

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Research and evaluation toolkit

Table of Contents

Figure 2: RET Contents

Each Guide follows a similar format and approach. Starting with "How to carry out survey research" the Guide provides an overview of survey research for mentoring programme managers and is intended to assist them to carry out programme evaluation through the use of surveys (see Figures 3–6). The users are prompted to think about the objectives of the research or evaluation, the time and resources allocated to evaluate, the potential participants, and data analysis techniques. Reflecting on the key challenges of capacity and capability, thinking long and hard about the time and resources available, in addition to the data collection method and data analysis techniques are all important considerations.

Introduction – overview of survey research

- Surveys are widely used in a range of research settings, e.g. political attitudes, economic behaviour, market research, social values, organisational research

Advantages:

- Collect information in a standardized and consistent way

- Cost-effective (compared to other methodologies)

- Allows you to reach lots of participants

- Can provide a representative overview

- Relatively straightforward to analyse the data (e.g. numerical counts and percentages)

Disadvantages:

- However, there is a limit to the amount of information you can get from a questionnaire – there is a trade-off between brevity and detail

- In general, very good at answering 'what', 'who' and 'how many' questions; less good at understanding the 'why'

Figure 3: Introduction to Survey Research

Designing questionnaires

- Preparation is key

- Before you start designing your questionnaire, be clear about:

What is the objective of your research?

Who do you want to get information from?

How much time/resources do you have?

How are you going to analyse your data?

Figure 4: Designing the Survey/Questionnaire

Questions - types of questions

- The questions you include in the questionnaire depend entirely on the purposes of the research or evaluation being done

- In general, there are two types of questionnaire questions: 'open' and 'closed':

Open Questions	Closed Questions
Respondents can answer in their own terms/words	Help to clarify the meaning of a question to respondents
Can be too vague or difficult to answer properly	Force answers (and it's difficult to make options exhaustive and mutually exclusive)
Are good to explore topics	Reduce variability of answers
Unusual/unexpected answers are allowed	Allow comparability of answers
Time consuming to answer, code and analyse	Easy to answer and process

Figure 5: Designing the Survey/Questionnaire

Designing questionnaires

- Questionnaires tend to follow a standardized format. They will all contain the following elements:

  - **Title**

  - **Introduction** – this provides a brief explanation of the research or evaluation

  - **Questions** – this is the bulk of the survey, where you are obtaining information from your participants

  - **Concluding statement** – thanks participants and gives them contact information if they want to get in touch

Figure 6: Constructing the Survey/Questionnaire

The RET outlines the principal steps in designing, administering, and collecting questionnaires and is intended to be consulted in combination with the questionnaire templates which provide short, medium, and long exemplars which can be adapted to fit the particular needs of the programme objectives. The importance of ethics, transparency, and data management are emphasised throughout the RET.

The Guides associated with data analysis are intended to support mentoring programme managers and their evaluation team to begin to explore the data and how the data relates to the research or evaluation as a whole. The Guide explains the concept of data analysis and the step by step

process required to make decisions about how to present the data, what story the organization wants to tell, what needs to be included and/or excluded, and how the findings link to the wider research/evaluation aims.

In relation to survey data, the Guide advises the evaluation team to think about:

- What are the implications of the data? What is the data showing, what does it mean about the respondents' view and experiences?

- What relationships and trends are evident? Is there any clear relationship between how respondents answer? Are there trends over time, or are there any patterns amongst respondents with similar backgrounds, or in the same location?

- How do the findings relate to other information or literature? Are the findings of the analysis what they expected to find? Are they surprising in any way? Think about why this might/might not be.

- What actions might be considered as a result of the findings? How will the information revealed be used to inform current and future practice or organizational strategy?

- Is there additional information or research that should be conducted? Is there data that was not able to be collected that is important to obtain? Has anything been revealed that the team would like to know more about?

The RET provides a series of prompt questions; with this in mind, the evaluation team is able to conduct data analysis in a systematic way so that the evaluation team is clear what story the data is telling and what patterns and trends are revealed. We also encourage the team to think about their own specific research needs before embarking on any data collection. The prompt questions can be viewed in Figure 7.

The RET also provides guidance on the use of charts and graphs which are particularly useful to explore numerical data and can be used to summarize datasets in a visual manner and to show patterns and relationship between different variables. The section explains that charts and graphs can be used to interrogate the information as well as present the findings in a visually-appealing, user-friendly way. A menu of different types of graphs is provided, including: bar charts, column charts, line graphs, pie charts and scatterplots. The Guide then goes on to explain each type of chart and provide visual representations.

The *How to* Guides are supported by three Appendices which provide templates for questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. Taking into account influences such as budget and resource constraints, the templates provided give examples of short, medium, and longer-length options for the evaluation team to consider (see Figure 8).

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Data collection

- Think about your own specific research needs before carrying out any data collection:

What do you want to find out?

What are your research questions?

Who do you want to get information from?

What is the best way to get the information you need?

How much time/resources do you have?

How are you going to interpret / present the information?

Figure 7. Specific Research Needs

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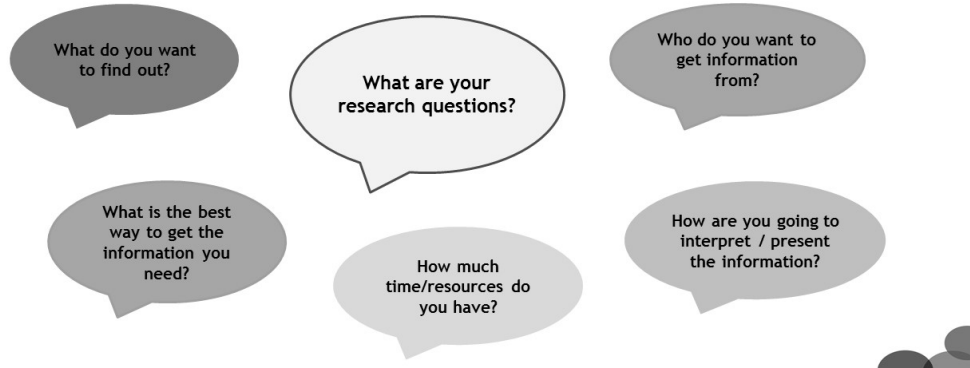## Research and evaluation toolkit

Templates

- Questionnaire (short, medium and long versions)
- Interview schedule (short, medium and long)
- Focus group topic guide (short, medium and long)

- They provide an example of instruments to collect data from participants evaluating a mentoring programme
- They are intended as a starting point for conducting your own survey research
- Users are encouraged to think about their own specific research needs before using the templates
- You should consider adapting the template(s) according to your needs to make sure it can answer your research questions

Figure 8: Templates

The RET was supported by a webinar series which introduced the overarching approach and guided the audience through each *How to* Guide. Five webinars were facilitated by the research team at weekly intervals. All mentoring programme managers and their evaluation team were invited to attend the webinar series and for those that were unable to attend, the webinars were recorded and available on the virtual learning platform to listen to and watch at a later date. The first webinar provided an overview of the rationale for the RET and why it was developed by the Middlesex research team. The webinar guided participants through the approach and format

of the RET, in addition to explaining how the toolkit was intended to be used by the recipients to support their own research and evaluation of their mentoring programmes. Webinars 2 to 5 focused on a specific aspect of research and evaluation (see Figures 9–10).

The webinars take the participants through the RET and each Guide, highlighting the most important aspects of the research process.

Introduction to the Webinar series

The **second** webinar in the series will:

1) Guide participants through the Research and Evaluation toolkit's 'how to...' guide on carrying out survey research

2) Introduce the main principles of conducting research and evaluation through the use of surveys

3) Outline the main steps involved in designing, administering and collecting questionnaires, with the aid of the templates included in the toolkit

The **third** webinar in the series will:

1) Guide participants through the Research and Evaluation toolkit's 'how to...' guides on carrying out interview, focus group and visual methods research

2) Introduce the main principles of conducting qualitative research and evaluation through the use of interview and focus groups, including the inclusion of visual methods

3) Outline the main steps involved in designing and carrying out qualitative research/evaluation, with the aid of the templates included in the toolkit

Figure 9: Introduction to the Webinar Series; Webinars 2 and 3

Introduction to the Webinar series

The **fourth** webinar in the series will:

1) Guide participants through the Research and Evaluation toolkit's 'how to...' guides on data analysis and visualisation

2) Introduce the main principles involved in analysing quantitative numerical data, and in analysing qualitative textual or visual data

3) Outline main steps involved in analysing, visualising & interpreting research/evaluation findings

The **fifth** webinar in the series will:

1) Guide participants through the Research and Evaluation toolkit's 'how to...' guide on writing an evaluation report

2) Focus of the main steps involved in presenting the overall evaluation project, its purpose, methodology and findings

3) Outline the different decisions that need to be made when producing a research or evaluation report on the basis of primary data collection

Figure 10: Introduction to the Webinar Series; Webinars 4 and 5

Discussion and Implications for HRD Practice

The challenges experienced by mentoring programme managers in the entrepreneurial and/or volunteer context are not unique; indeed, issues of capacity and capability in relation to the evaluation of any programme are similar in many organizations and sectors. Having the knowledge, tools, and resources to effectively evaluate are necessary in any context. The role and effectiveness of ongoing monitoring and evaluation in relation to demonstrating the impact of human resource development interventions is crucial. Identifying the purpose of the evaluation is key, as by establishing specific programme expectations and/or outcomes there is a greater chance of being able to assess the effectiveness of the programme. Following the identification of the expectations and/or outcomes, the RET gives clear direction by providing a step by step guide to survey, interview, focus group and visual methods, supported with data analysis, report writing guidance, and data collection templates. The evaluation strategy and approach must be integrated into the mentoring programme overarching design with clear indicators of the scope of the evaluation. To summarize, the overall implications are as follows:

1. First, the ongoing measurement and review of business mentoring outcomes is a key process within the design of mentoring programmes. The overall YBI research confirms that this is a significant challenge for mentoring programme managers.

2. Second, a planned approach using a range of evaluation methods is required to assess the effectiveness of mentoring relationships and identify the wider organizational impact. Our experience of undertaking the YBI mentoring research has clearly highlighted this.

3. Third, based on our experience, the RET is offered as example of a holistic resource which HRD practitioners can use to support on-going and summative evaluation of mentoring activities.

To conclude, there has been significant added value to all stakeholders throughout the research project. One of the most noteworthy initiatives is the creation of a RET accompanied by an online webinar series, as presented in this paper. It is hoped that the RET will address one of the most significant challenges, at the same time providing capability support and professional development for practitioners in a variety of fields, including mentoring.

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