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Entrepreneurship Mentoring in Higher Education: How does the Mentor benefit?

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Entrepreneurship Mentoring in Higher Education: How does the Mentor benefit?

Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to identify entrepreneur mentor benefits and challenges as a result of entrepreneurship mentoring in higher education (HE).

Design/methodology/approach

An entrepreneurship mentoring scheme was developed at a UK university to support prospective student entrepreneurs, with mentors being entrepreneurs drawn from the local business community. A mentor-outcomes framework was developed and applied to guide semi-structured interviews.

Findings

Results supported the broader applicability of our framework, with a revised framework developed to better represent the entrepreneur mentor context. Alongside psychosocial and personal developmental outcomes, mentors benefitted from entrepreneurial learning, renewed commitment to their own ventures, and the development of additional skills sets. Enhanced business performance also manifested itself for some mentors. A range of challenges are presented, some generic to the entrepreneur setting and others more specific to the Higher Education (HE) setting.

Originality

The vast majority of entrepreneurship mentoring studies focus on the benefits to the mentee. By focussing on benefits and challenges for the entrepreneur mentor, this study extends our

knowledge of the benefit of entrepreneurship mentoring. It offers an empirically derived

entrepreneur mentor outcomes framework, as well as offering insights into challenges for the

entrepreneur mentor within an HE setting.

Research implications

The framework offered serves as a starting point for further researchers to explore and refine

the outcomes of entrepreneur mentoring.

Practical implications

The findings serve to support those considering developing a mentor programme or including

mentoring as part of a formal entrepreneurship education offer, specifically in a university

setting but also beyond.

Keywords: Mentoring, Mentors, Entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurship Education, Graduate

Entrepreneurship, Higher Education

Introduction

The developmental role of mentoring for entrepreneurship is well documented (Ahsan

et al. 2018; Baluku *et al*. 2019; Kubberød *et al*. 2018; Nabi *et al*. 2021; Radu-Lefebvre and

Redien-Collot 2013). However, to date, explicit investigation of outcomes for the entrepreneur

mentor, as opposed to for the mentee, has received very limited attention (Ahsan *et al*. 2018)

even though the very underpinnings of mentoring should involve a reciprocal, mutually

beneficial relationship (Eby 1997; Haggard *et al*. 2011; Jones and Brown 2011; Kram 1983;

Schmidt and Faber 2016). Reflecting mentor outcomes in Higher Education (HE), Lyons,

Scroggins, and Rule (1990, p.279) suggest: "It should be noted that mentoring in graduate

school is not a one-way relationship with the student receiving all of the benefits. Certain

advantages accrue to the mentor as well." However, identification of benefits for the

entrepreneur mentor have received scarcely any attention.

The aim of this study is therefore to address the gap in the literature surrounding entrepreneur mentor outcomes. Given the novelty of the study's focus, challenges faced by the entrepreneur mentor in the HE setting are also explored, not least because these will affect the mentoring relationship and thereby also mentor outcomes. Based on this aim, our research question is: 'How does entrepreneur mentoring benefit the mentor?' With an associated, second research question being 'What challenges does the entrepreneur mentor encounter?' In developing a theoretical framework, we draw insight in particular from Eby and Lockwood (2005) who investigated mentor outcomes in an organisational setting. We then use this framework to explore the mentoring experience from the perspective of entrepreneur mentors.

For the purposes of our paper, it is important to recognise that formal mentoring which is the focus of this paper incorporates an assigned pairing of mentors with protégés as part of a developmental programme (Bäker *et al.* 2020; Wanberg *et al.* 2006). This is distinct from informal mentoring, which is an all-encompassing concept that effectively includes many forms of ongoing support that results from 'unstructured social interaction' (Wanberget *et al.* 2006, p.410).

Literature Review

Setting the Scene: Entrepreneurship Mentoring in HE

There exists considerable interest in mentoring in a HE setting. Crisp and Cruz (2009) identified nearly 50 such mentoring studies. However, just two of these considered mentor outcomes: Carlson and Single's (2000) study which focussed on 'electronic mentoring' of engineering students and Reddick (2006) who targeted the experience of the mentoring relationship from the perspective of African American faculty mentors. Other studies of mentoring in HE that do have some (though not primary) focus on mentor outcomes include

Dutton (2003) where it was suggested mentors who were professionals external to HE were able to source recruits for their organizations from the student body, Mondisa and Adams (2022) who recognised mentors' learning about their mentees' lives which helped them reflect on their own experiences, in turn making them better mentors, and Roberts, Storm, and Flynn (2019) who identified 'giving something back' and being able to improve overall organisational understanding. Giving something back, also to the wider community, was identified by Spence and Hyams-Ssekasi (2015).

Arguably, there is some focus on mentor outcomes where peer mentoring in HE is involved (Danzi *et al*. 2020; de Villiers and Kirstein 2017). However, the peers in these studies tend to be students themselves, rather than faculty, certainly not entrepreneur mentors, though there are exceptions to this rule (e.g. D'Angelo and Epstein, 2014).

While the study of mentoring for entrepreneurship has received some recent research attention (e.g. Audet and Couteret, 2012; Bisk 2002; Chang and Cheng, 2024; Kim, 2023; Lall, 2023; Meddeb *et al*. 2024; Terjesen and Sullivan 2011; St-Jean and Tremblay 2020; Theaker, 2023), studies of formal mentoring programmes specifically for entrepreneurship in HE are rare (exceptions include Baluku *et al*. 2019; Bell and Bell 2016; Kubberød, *et al*. 2018; Radu-Lefebvre and Redien-Collot 2013). This is surprising as 'more universities and governments… *are* attempting to use this powerful tool in an effort to develop potential entrepreneurs' (Wilbanks 2013, p.93). Gimmon's (2014) study used entrepreneurship students as mentors, with mentors then also being mentored by more senior staff. Here, student mentors were found to have developed a higher understanding of entrepreneurship and to have developed improved business planning skills (Gimmon, 2014).

Mentor Outcomes

The reciprocal nature of mentoring was identified in Kram and Isabella's (1985) seminal paper. Despite this early recognition of reciprocity, there is some agreement that most

mentoring studies focus on mentee outcomes only, possibly because for some scholars, mentoring's primary purpose is to support the mentee (Eby *et al*. 2007). For example, Baugh and Sullivan (2005, p.426) in the introduction to a special issue on mentoring and career development felt it was necessary to mention that the benefits of mentoring accrue 'to both parties…rather than primarily or only to the protégé'. Further studies point to the relative paucity of mentor outcome studies (Coates 2012; Ragins and Verbos 2007; Won and Choi 2017).

Moreover, where the focus has been on the mentor, this has occurred within an organisational context, and here predominantly in corporations rather than in small firms (McKevitt and Marshall 2015) with a focus on the employee rather than student business start-up (Wanberg, Kammeyer-Mueller, and Marchese 2006). Consequently, variables used to assess mentoring's impact on the mentor frequently relate also to the (large) employing organisation. For example, Wanberg *et al*. (2006) looked at the effect on the mentor's job performance and organisational commitment. Fletcher and Ragins (2007) suggest mentoring may enhance the visibility of the mentor in the organisation, that it can lead to a greater sense of fulfilment in their work role and generally become a more effective member of the organisation. Bozionelos (2004) indicated mentoring was associated with both extrinsic (e.g. pay and promotion) and intrinsic (e.g. job satisfaction) career benefits. Similarly, self-growth as a leader was the overriding theme that emerged in studies of peer-mentoring within the context of leadership (Garvey and Westlander, 2013; Won and Choi, 2017). Ramaswami and Dreher (2007) argue that the mentor may benefit from an element of reciprocity in the mentoring relationship in that the mentee tries to 'pay back' the mentor by offering information and feedback. Thus, given the positive outcomes associated with mentoring in organisations we suggest similar benefits may accrue to the entrepreneur mentor in HE.

Notwithstanding similarities, we propose the outcomes for the entrepreneur mentor could be distinct in some respects from the outcomes within an organisational setting (Clutterbuck, 2014). Chandler *et al*.'s (2011) ecological systems perspective of mentoring raises the issue of context, indicating that the mentoring setting has come off weakest in terms of research focus in mentoring studies, notwithstanding its importance. This study pursues this idea, recognising that the small firm and entrepreneurship setting should influence outcomes for the entrrepreneur mentor. Not least, the entrepreneurship setting provides a different career development context. The developmental needs of the entrepreneur mentor and mentees suggest a different type of mentoring relationship with entrepreneurship-distinct outcomes a likely result. Mentoring for entrepreneurship is also likely to be more emotionally intense because of the higher levels of risk, stress and potential financial loss related to business start-up (Greenhaus *et al*., 2000; Miller and Le Breton-Miller 2017).

A Framework of Entrepreneurship Mentor Outcomes

Given the minimal focus on entrepreneur mentor outcomes in the literature, we turn here necessarily to the broader literature relating to mentor outcomes, in particular Eby and Lockwood's (2005) work which aligns with our focus on mentor outcomes. Eby and Lockwood (2005) whose framework itself draws on an established body of knowledge in mentoring in organisations (Kram and Hall, 1996; Kram and Isabella, 1985; Ragins and Scandura, 1999) propose four key mentor benefits: (1) developing a personal relationship; (2) personal gratification from seeing someone else (within the organisation) succeed which relates to altruistic needs; (3) learning; and (4) the identification of personal strengths and weaknesses through reflection and reliving their own experiences through the mentees (similar to what Ragins and Scandura, 1999, label as generativity). The notion of generativity also extends to giving something of oneself to the next generation, passing on one's legacy (Healy and Welchert, 1990), thereby allowing the mentor to gain a sense of immortality (Erikson 1963).

Interpreted in this way generativity could also relate to a sense of personal gratification. The first two of these dimensions therefore reflect psychosocial functions (emotional and psychological support; Olian *et al*. 1993), while the latter two reflect career development functions for the mentor.

We suggest that the psychosocial outcomes as described in the mentor outcome literature are likely to be more applicable to our entrepreneurship setting than the career developmental outcomes which tend to be viewed in relation to organisational careers. For example, being able to build rapport with the mentee, or getting a sense of satisfaction from having assisted the mentee will have relevance for the mentor, irrespective of the mentoring context. In contrast, traditional career benefits in terms of, for example, promotion, pay increases, organisational commitment or how to navigate the corporate world (Aryee *et al.*,1996) are less relevant to the entrepreneurship setting where entrepreneur mentors are managing their own businesses (St-Jean 2011; Waters *et al*., 2002). Thus, our framework builds on and extends Eby and Lockwood (2005), by incorporating psychosocial outcomes from an organizational context, and also personal developmental outcomes from entrepreneur mentoring in the HE context, both of which are discussed in the following sections.

Psychosocial Benefits to the Mentor

The two psychosocial functions of Eby and Lockwood's (2005) framework (personal gratification and developing a relationship) may be directly relevant to our focus on entrepreneurship mentoring. We anticipate that analogous to the organisational setting, an outcome for the entrepreneur mentor could relate to personal gratification from seeing a mentee benefit from support provided. This could even apply more in an entrepreneurial setting where business start-up has been recognised as frequently involving emotional, physical and psychological stress requiring resilience particularly after setbacks (Doyle Corner *et al*., 2017; Lee and Wang 2017; Miller and Le Breton-Miller 2017) and where the psychosocial benefits

exceed the career-related benefits (Waters *et al.,* 2002). Personal gratification could also relate to a sense of self-worth or esteem (Eby and Lockwood, 2005, write of pride and meeting altruistic needs) that could arise from assuming a supportive role.

Similarly, Eby and Lockwood's (2005) second dimension, the development of a personal relationship may apply irrespective of organisational/non-organisational context. However, due to the shared organisational setting, it is possible that the development of a personal relationship might be facilitated (Hinde 1997).

Personal Developmental Benefits to the Mentor

In addition to psychosocial mentor outcomes, Eby and Lockwood (2005) refer to two personal developmental, career-enhancing outcomes related to the notion of learning: learning in a general sense, and learning relating to the identification of personal strengths and weaknesses through reflection and mentors reliving their own experiences through the mentees.

With regard to learning, Eby and Lockwood (2005) suggest that where mentor and mentee come from different business units, but within the same organisation, learning in terms of a transfer of knowledge between units may occur. Kram and Hall (1996) argue that learning between mentor and mentee is reciprocal, particularly in turbulent career settings where both mentor and mentee may change job roles frequently. We can transpose this idea to the entrepreneurship situation: rather than considering departments, or roles within an organisation, we consider the transfer of knowledge about the mentees' start-up to the mentor's business. This aligns with McKevitt and Marshall's (2015) interpretation of the role of learning within a mentoring programme for small business owners as a form of career support. Turning the focus of the learning on the mentor, this would then mean they may learn about a particular aspect of the start-up that they can transfer to their own business.

Learning about one's strengths and weaknesses relates to mentoring's ability to foster self-reflection, which, although often associated with the mentee, can also apply to the mentor.

Eby and Lockwood (2005) describe this as being akin to the aforementioned notion of generativity (Ragins and Scandura 1999): being able to relive one's own experiences through the mentees' experiences, although it can also relate to giving back to a younger generation (see for example Erikson's, 1963, early work on the notion of generativity). One potential benefit could be the opportunity to take a step back from one's own business and reflect on it in light of the experiences of the mentee's start-up efforts.

Challenges to the Mentor

Because of the comparatively limited research on entrepreneur mentor outcomes (compared to research on mentee outcomes), especially in an HE setting (Ahsan *et al*., 2018; Crisp and Cruz, 2009), this study also focuses on challenges that arose. These challenges may affect the mentoring relationship and associated mentor outcomes. In fact, mentoring relationships may face several challenges that affect mentor outcomes. Mentor-mentee mismatch is a common problem (McKevitt and Marshall 2015) where issues such as age differences, physical distance but also feelings of personal inadequacy might prove challenging for the mentoring relationship (Eby and Lockwood, 2005). In contrast, Beech and Brockbank (1999) suggest that mentors may see themselves as experienced knowledge holders and advice givers, so there could be an issue of overconfidence on the part of the mentor to which mentees may react differently.

Garvey and Westlander (2013) propose that to understand mentoring one needs to understand the context within which it takes place, which was also seen as critical by Chandler *et al*., (2011). This is also recognised by McKevitt and Marshall (2015, p. 276) who, within the setting of entrepreneurial mentoring, claim there is not the same 'power-dependence' as in manager-subordinate relationships. Just as there are possible differences in mentor outcomes for entrepreneurship mentors as opposed to traditional organisational mentors, there is an

indication here that there may also be challenges unique to entrepreneurship mentoring relationships.

Method

Sample and Procedure

Allen *et al*., (2008) suggest researchers should consider the application of qualitative approaches in exploring how mentoring support functions may apply to different contexts. We have adopted this approach in trying to make sense of mentoring's impact outside its normal organisational setting. To understand broader mentoring benefits the study is based on interviews with entrepreneur mentors that drew on 18 formal mentoring relationships. These relationships were the result of a mentoring programme designed by the researchers at a university in the UK. Mentors were all university graduates (eight males, two females), some quite recent graduates, others having graduated up to eighteen years previously. All mentors had gone on to start their own businesses (see Table 1). Most mentors (8) had established their businesses at least five years previously (both female mentors were recent graduates and recent entrepreneurs having started their businesses within the previous two years).

Although it would have been possible to select mentors without first-hand experience of starting their own businesses, we felt in terms of practical advice and consequent learning on part of the mentees, but also in terms of mentors' interest and potential learning, using actual entrepreneurs was preferable. In addition, because entrepreneur mentors had a similar educational and career development background (student to entrepreneur) to the mentees, who were in their first or second year of an undergraduate business programme, there was an element of shared experience which we hoped would support the mentoring relationships, and thereby also the potential positive outcomes for both parties. The importance of careful

selection of mentors for successful mentoring is generally accepted (Garvey *et al*., 2009; Lancer *et al*., 2016) and has also been recognised within a HE context (Morales *et al*., 2021).

Table 1 approximately here

Initially fourteen potential mentors were approached; four withdrew early on for work or personal reasons. Where possible, we paired mentors with mentees based on similarity of business interest. Most mentors (6) had two mentees, one mentor had three, and the three remaining mentors had one mentee each. Time and desire to assist also determined how many mentees were taken on.

Mentees were selected from a sample of undergraduate business students based on their levels of entrepreneurial intent which we saw as a proxy for commitment to and interest in entrepreneurship. Potential participants' level of entrepreneurial intent was assessed via a survey using Thompson's (2009) measure. The highest scoring decile on Thompson's (2009) measure (25 students), were invited to participate in the mentoring programme. Although all twenty-five students expressed an initial willingness to participate in the study, due to attrition (this occurred early on, mainly due to time commitments) we draw here on eighteen mentoring relationships.

Both mentors and mentees were briefed on the programme, its purpose, and codes of conduct. Mentors received training covering: (1) their role as mentors (for example to be developmental and supportive), and (2) approaches to mentoring. Mentors and mentees met at least once a month but were otherwise free to determine the frequency and scope of their meetings. The mentoring process ran for a 5-month period. This may be regarded as relatively short within an organisational context, though within an HE setting other coaching and mentoring studies mirror this (or are shorter still, e.g. Artis 2013; Bell and Bell 2016; Lech *et al*., 2018; Ogbuanya and Chukwuedo 2017).

Data were collected from mentors via semi-structured interviews at the end of the programme. The broader structure of the interview revolved around learning, impacts on the business and the mentoring experience (mirroring Eby and Lockwood's, 2005, theoretical framework in terms of psychosocial and career-developmental foci) and mentoring challenges. We also asked mentors to keep a diary record of their meetings in a 'mentor reflection form'.

The diary record forms were designed to assist mentors' own development and were only used sparingly by mentors. We reviewed the reflections to support our analysis and although not revealing new insights, they corroborated what was said in the interviews thereby strengthening the trustworthiness of the results (Nowell *et al*., 2017) .

Data Analysis Strategy

Our first step to analyse the data involved reviewing the transcripts for the purposes of data familiarisation (Miles and Huberman 1994). Subsequently we transferred the transcripts to the software NVivo and created a coding scheme (see main headings in Figure 1) largely derived from our theoretical framework with three 'first-order' themes related to what we have termed the mentor experience: (1) psychosocial outcomes, (2) personal development, and (3) mentoring challenges. Each of these themes were further broken down into the following second-order themes respectively: (1a) developing a personal relationship, (1b) personal gratification; (2a) learning, (2b) enhanced interpersonal skills, (2c) commitment to entrepreneurship/the venture, (2d) networking, and lastly (3) challenges, with three second-order sub-themes (student engagement, expectations, and technicalities in mentoring). The themes relating to challenges were emergent whereby 'challenges' did not feature in Eby and Lockwood (2005) which focussed solely on mentor outcomes. Similarly, the theme 'Business Performance' is unique to the entrepreneurship mentoring scenario and was not something we had anticipated at the start of the coding process. As such, this too is an emergent theme.

To ensure coding reliability, i.e., that the coding scheme was being interpreted and applied consistently, three researchers first discussed the coding scheme (definitions of each code), before then applying the coding scheme to the data, independently coding two interview transcripts. The researchers then reconvened and compared the sections of the interviews they had coded. Subsequently, any discrepancies in interpreting and applying the coding were addressed, before the researchers continued to independently code and compare the remaining transcripts. Because of the initial comparison of the coding application, no notable discrepancies emerged upon comparison of the final transcripts. Thus, this process ensured that the resulting coding of all transcripts had agreement of all researchers. Using multiple coders to increase trustworthiness was also adopted by Won and Choi (2017) in their research of mentors' experiences. All names (also or organisations) in the below have been changed to safeguard anonymity.

Figure 1 approximately here

Findings

The findings section is structured around our framework (Figure 1) where we have also added dimensions based on themes that emerged from the analysis. We first examine psychosocial outcomes, then personal developmental outcomes and finally mentoring challenges. We use quotations to illustrate the points being made to provide a 'flavour' of the thoughts and feelings of the mentors in accordance with our interpretive methodology (Brodley 1996). We have also summarised key points to each mentoring relationship in Table 1.

Psychosocial Outcomes

We segmented psychosocial outcomes into two key sub-themes: personal gratification and developing a personal relationship. The first sub-theme, *'personal gratification'*, relates to

satisfaction from having been able to help the mentee. This personal gratification is reflected

in the mentors' sentiments of being able to 'give something back' (Naveed), or 'having a

positive impact on young people's lives' (Amar). This is in part the result of having been able

to provide useful advice which aligns with the mentoring role of conveying knowledge, and

providing the mentee with a sense of the business start-up process, indeed having assumed a

role model status:

> *[Mentee] is always really positive, and he always said that he is inspired by*
>
> *the things I do is lovely. It sounds silly to say aloud. It is a nice compliment.*
>
> *(Mark)*

So, the focus of the gratification could also relate to the mentor's own achievements, that is,

mentoring provides an opportunity for the mentor to reflect on his/her own 'focussed hard

work' (Naveed) that got them to where they are today, or on their own skills 'So yes, I am a

good listener.' (Ellie)

At other times the sense of personal gratification comes from having improved the

mentees' skills and competencies more generally, having been instrumental in the mentee's

development ('and the fact that you can see someone developing…that thinking is fantastic'

Naveed), or indeed simply because of the confidence boost the mentees received.

> *I think I was just giving [mentee] a confidence boost in his targets to*
>
> *achieve. Because I was once in the same position …telling him if I can do*
>
> *it, certainly he can do it…If you got the passion to do it, it would work. I*
>
> *have seen that his confidence has increased (Ellie)*

To a degree, mentors also appreciate that someone was following in their footsteps, for

example:

...it was a kind of throwback to see, to remind myself of how ambitious I

was when I was at university, and it renewed that in me. It is really good.

(Lucy)

We can distinguish therefore two separate sources of personal gratification, one relating to the self (generativity and giving something back), the other relating to outcomes achieved by the mentee.

The second sub-theme, 'developing a personal relationship' relates to friendship as an outcome of the mentoring relationship captured in the following quote: '[Mentee] and I kept on talking and became friends post project' and 'we have got a friendship now and that is based on the project.' (Mark)

While some did not mention friendship per se, it became clear that the relationships went beyond purely a professional, business-support focus. Mentors encourage mentees to keep in touch and the mentoring relationship goes from a focus on entrepreneurship to personal development more generally, with the sharing of personal information.

[Mentee] and I were exchanging emails and he was very keen to tell me

about his family and his background and where he was coming from.

(Mark)

Personal Developmental Outcomes

It is noted that the themes covered within the personal development theme are broader than the related career developmental outcomes often referred to within an organisational mentoring setting. The subthemes are development of entrepreneurial learning, the development of interpersonal skills, networking, commitment to entrepreneurship/the venture, and business performance.

To begin with, we identified something akin to reverse mentoring, where the transfer of knowledge was reversed (Damnjanovic, Proud, and Milosavljevic 2021; Greengard 2002), i.e., the information flowed from mentee to mentor. Examples of this include managing costs and sourcing suppliers, increased knowledge of their own industry/markets, or an increased awareness of having to be decisive, or thinking strategically:

[Mentee] wanted to talk about what he needed to do towards his business

plan and then I thought I should go and see what I could do in this regard.

(Ellie)

Alternatively, there was simply a general sense of having been given an opportunity to reflect on one's past decisions, for example, 're-connecting with the early lessons you have learnt…re-connecting with the foundation lessons of business' (Piers; see also below section on commitment to entrepreneurship). This also resulted in a degree of introspection and self-criticism:

...there are so many people who have given me advice along the way, when

you are younger you think you know the best and it is always like if you

knew then what you know now… (Naveed)

The second sub-theme, developing interpersonal skills included a strong emphasis on communication skills such as improved listening skills 'asking the right questions is definitely a skill I developed' (Amar), improved counselling skills becoming better at 'transferring knowledge', and being more patient and understanding of others' needs ('… and to be a little bit more patient… because you can't expect everyone to be like you', Murad). Participants also mentioned an increase in confidence in their own skills sets more generally.

The third sub-theme relates to 'networking', which refers to the mentor expanding their professional network by virtue of the relationship established with their mentee(s), and then

via him/her to others in the mentee's circle of acquaintances, including via social media. Furthermore, when providing mentee(s) with advice on expanding their network, there is recognition the mentors need to do more networking themselves too:

> *Suggesting them [developing networks, specifically here blogs and start-up*
> *broadcasts] to mentees reminded me that I actually need to do that*
> *myself…You get messed up with all the operational stuff… (Piers)*

The fourth sub-theme relates to the mentor's 'commitment to entrepreneurship/the venture'. The mentoring relationship gave mentors an opportunity to 'step back' and reflect on their own entrepreneurial journeys resulting in commitment to their entrepreneurial career paths. To illustrate, Lucy emphasises her mentoring role supports 'renewed passion…it renewed that kind of excitement about it [entrepreneurship].' In a similar way, mentees' enthusiasm rekindles, or strengthens, a desire for entrepreneurship. The notion of uncovering or rediscovering one's passion is also apparent: 'the passion was always there, just to remind you that you can still do more…' (Michael), or, according to Ellie "This session caused me to reflect on the continuous development of my business and how I should create an action plan to grow the business, take it to the next level and to not become complacent."

A final theme that emerged as part of the broader 'personal development' theme is 'business performance'. This relates to any evidence that the mentoring had affected the mentor's business directly. Ellie, for example, after advising her mentee to undertake more research on suppliers decided to do the same for her own business, which results in cost reductions. For Mark, the interaction with his mentees provides him with potential further sales avenues and generates future product promotion ideas.

> *Interviewer: 'Ok any spark of new ideas for yourself, not for the mentees*
> *but for your own self?" Respondent: "Yes, the type of nights that I am*

> *going to put on for the magazine…Yes really positive in terms of ideas*
>
> *generation for the future of the magazine.' (Mark)*

Mentor Challenges

We categorise 'mentor challenges' into challenges as they relate to the mentee, i.e. the student, regarding their engagement and expectations, and technicalities as they relate to the mentoring process. The first two 'mentor challenges' sub-themes relate to mentees' 'lack of engagement' and 'unrealistic expectations'. These two student-centred sub-themes are not entirely unrelated, but are treated separately. Although there is a great deal of student engagement with the mentoring process overall, a sense of frustration is evident on the part of some mentors (Amar, Mark, Murad, Nathan) who experience (what they perceived as) a lack of engagement from student mentees. Examples of a lack of engagement included not turning up to meetings on time, or cancelling last minute, or not displaying sufficient enthusiasm. For mentors who had two mentees they could experience both engagement from one and lack of engagement from another:

> *I was quite saddened when [Mentee 1] left because I thought we had some*
>
> *common things, but I think he had other priorities…whereas [Mentee 2]*
>
> *was the kind of constant guy, he pushed me and was always saying when*
>
> *are you free, when are you free? It was really positive. (Mark)*

With regard to unrealistic expectations, this related to mentees' perceptions that the mentoring would provide an easy path to entrepreneurial success:

> *…they just want to copy something and have an established company*
>
> *overnight. That was the wrong vision for some of my mentees. (Michael)*

Regarding 'technicalities of the mentoring process', the main concerns relate to the types of interaction with the mentee. Thus, mentors raised concerns related to mentees' lack of conviction regarding the type of business they wanted to start (e.g., "I think again it is because their ideas are so raw or they're in infancy of what they actually want to do"; Naveed). Mentors seemed surprised that mentees changed their minds or were not, at the outset, wholly committed to a particular business idea. A few mentors reflected critically on areas they also could improve on such as investing more time or paying more attention to mentees' needs, e.g. "I think my time management was a problem not necessarily my focus when I was with them" (Mark). However, this kind of self-criticism was limited.

Discussion

Extending Eby and Lockwood's (2005) mentor outcomes framework that was developed for traditional organisational mentoring, we offer a first overview of entrepreneur mentor outcomes within the context of HE that also reflects challenges specific to the HE mentoring setting. We identified several positive psychosocial and personal developmental outcomes for mentors, some of which overlap with mentor outcomes generally (as typically discussed in an organisational setting, e.g. Kram, 1988; Lancer *et al*., 2016; MacLennan, 2017), while others are specific to the entrepreneur mentor setting.

In line with the theoretical foundation of mentoring's impact (Ghosh and Reio, 2013; Kram and Isabella, 1985; Nabi *et al*. 2021), psychosocial outcomes for mentors are apparent in our data, for example, achieving a sense of personal gratification from being able to support their mentee(s). This sense of having been able to help someone was gratifying both in an altruistic sense (Eby and Lockwood, 2005), as well as in a reflection on the mentor's own abilities (i.e., being in a position of expertise), this latter manifestation being akin to Allen *et al*.'s (1997) 'self-satisfaction'. Here, there was also an aspect of generativity (Olian *et al*., 1993;

Ragins and Scandura, 1999) present in the mentoring experience in the sense of 'giving something back'.

Mentors also indicate psychosocial benefits arising from the relationship itself where some friendships were formed. A key benefit of mentoring for entrepreneurs is therefore its psychosocial elements, which includes emotional satisfaction and support, not only for the mentee (Nabi *et al.* 2021) but also for the mentor, suggesting more of a reciprocal nature of psychosocial outcomes. The importance of these psychosocial benefits should not be underestimated given the emotional challenges, as well as their implications, entrepreneurship frequently entails (Doyle Corner *et al.*, 2017; Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2017).

We also establish personal developmental outcomes for our entrepreneur mentors. In a traditional, organizational context, 'learning' as an outcome emerges because mentee and mentor may come from different organisational units, thereby facilitating intra-organisational knowledge flows (Eby and Lockwood, 2005). Given the HE and entrepreneurship setting, these intra-organisational knowledge flows were not applicable, and yet, knowledge exchange did take place. Not only did entrepreneurs benefit from the application of knowledge to their own organisations (see also below), but what we noticed was that for many mentors an awareness of their own knowledge, manifested via passing on this knowledge to mentees, boosted their sense of success, and made them realise how far they themselves had come. Mentoring provided an opportunity for the mentor to 'take a step back' and reflect on their own entrepreneurship journeys.

Alongside these psychosocial benefits, in some instances knowledge exchange impacted the mentor's business very directly. We identify an outcome of enhanced business performance where the mentor's advice to the mentee is then applied to the mentors' companies in the areas of supplier research, cost reduction, and targeting and sales promotion strategies. Because mentor and mentee were paired, where possible, according to sector, the opportunity

to learn from the mentee was enhanced. In an attempt to support mentees, mentors engaged in an exploration of market opportunities, either directly, or indirectly via the mentee who passed on market insights to them. Mansoori (2017) discusses vicarious learning in entrepreneurship in place of experiential learning, and notwithstanding the benefits of experiential learning, this type of vicarious learning is an important outcome for mentors.

Two further themes emerged relating to personal development. The first is a focus on networking, in which mentors expand their professional network via their mentees(s), for example, gaining access to the mentee's circle of acquaintances, including via social media. The second relates to enhanced commitment to the entrepreneurial venture. It is widely acknowledged that setting up and running a venture will require tenacity and resilience (Doyle Corner *et al*., 2017; Hedner *et al*., 2011; Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2017; Tipu, 2020). Here mentors were able to benefit from the mentoring relationship via a rediscovery of their passion for their own ventures.

Our analysis suggests mentoring challenges, not just benefits. Data point to the relatively short-term nature of the interaction and the very early-stage, nascent entrepreneur scenario as affecting the mentoring relationship. These issues are pertinent especially to the nature of mentoring for entrepreneurship in HE, i.e. students were in the early stages of the entrepreneurial process and tended not yet to have committed to a particular business idea, or even if they had, may not have travelled far along the venture creation pathway (cf. Katz and Gartner, 1988). This theme suggests that some mentors viewed student mentees as displaying a naïve perspective of entrepreneurship, we may say they lacked entrepreneurial maturity (Nabi *et al*., 2010). This could be interpreted as being precisely the reason for them requiring a mentoring programme although this may result in frustration on the part of the mentor.

Differences between mentoring in organisations and entrepreneurship mentoring were proposed, including the absence of direct control and hierarchy in the latter. A mentoring

relationship that occurs outside the confines of an organisation is more subject to the mentoring relationship 'working' as there are no organisational boundaries or expectations (whether formal or informal) that channel the relationship. In other words, matching of mentor and mentee become even more crucial in entrepreneurship mentoring. Here, mentoring relationships where a certain level of rapport was established were more likely to result in benefits accruing to both parties. Based on the challenges discussed by the mentors, a lack of commitment from either party and not having shared expectations of the relationship, would hinder positive outcomes on both sides. This was particularly important in our setting (though the issue about a mismatch in expectations has been noted elsewhere Clutterbuck, 2014). That said, because we adopted a matching process that connected mentor and mentee based on sectoral interest, provided an induction to the mentoring for both parties covering expectations, and because there was a shared experience in that all mentors had graduated from university before going on to set up their businesses, the mentoring relationships worked reasonably well.

In addition to the above, we offer here some additional observations, but acknowledge that these are tentative and yet worth drawing attention to, not least as an inspiration for other researchers to investigate further. As noted above and recognised by others (Lancer *et al.*, 2016), at the heart of mentoring is the mentoring relationship and this will depend on the characteristics of both mentor and mentee. Here we identified that years since graduation (which could be taken as a proxy for age) and years since establishing a business (a proxy for entrepreneurship knowledge and experience) will affect how the mentor engages with the mentee and the benefits that may arise. The notion of generativity manifested itself in different ways across the sample. For those who had long-established businesses more generativity in a literal sense (taking a generational perspective Erikson 1963) occurred. The notion of passing knowledge down to the next generation of entrepreneurs was clear. However, being able to relive the start-up experience and empathise with the mentee and therefore learn from their

experience (Olian *et al*., 1993) was more relevant to those who had more recent start-up experience (and generally tended to have graduated more recently).

Less expected is the manifestation of 'reverse mentoring' where younger and more tech-savvy mentees are supposed to be able to teach "the old dogs" (Greengard 2002, p.15) new tricks. As entrepreneurs, the mentors seemed quite familiar with the latest in technology and were able to share this knowledge with their mentees. The conclusion we draw from this is that within an entrepreneurship setting entrepreneur mentors are still able to teach the 'newbies' a few tricks.

Implications and Recommendations

Our study feeds into mentoring research in entrepreneurship (e.g. Ahsan *et al*. 2018; Baluku *et al*., 2019; Chang and Cheung, 2024; Kim, 2023; Meddeb *et al*., 2024; Radu-Lefebvre and Redien-Collot, 2013; St.Jean and Tremblay, 2020) and with its focus on the neglected aspect of entrepreneur mentor outcomes establishes a baseline for future studies. It adds to the body of knowledge surrounding mentoring within an HE setting (Bäker, Muschallik, and Pull 2020; Morales, Grineski, and Collins 2021) and with its enterprise focus, provides insights for researchers and educators interested in the burgeoning domain of entrepreneurship education (Liguori and Winkler 2019; Larios-Hernandez, Walmsley, and Lopez-Castro 2022). It also offers practical recommendations for those delivering and overseeing mentoring programmes, specifically in HE but also outside the HE setting.

First, we consider implications for entrepreneurship and mentoring scholars. Further research is recommended that seeks to understand the complexities inherent in entrepreneurship mentoring and that also emerged in our study. Thus, dyadic research designs that compare mentor and mentee outcomes (Meddeb *et al*., 2024; Wanberg *et al*., 2006) or studies that focus on mentoring styles (St-Jean and Audet 2013), approaches (Bäker *et al*.,

2020; Spitzmüller *et al*., 2008), settings (e.g. face-to-face vs. online, Lall *et al*., 2023) or studies of mentee outcomes in entrepreneurship (Nabi *et al*., 2021; Theaker, 2023) could be added to our framework in this endeavour.

Similar studies could identify the extent to which the HE setting matters with regard to outcomes. We believe our findings, because focussed on the entrepreneur mentor (rather than student mentees), will broadly transfer to other entrepreneur mentoring scenarios, i.e., outside of higher education, albeit with modifications. For example, there is growing awareness of the needs of senior entrepreneurs (Kautonen *et al*., 2014; Martin and Omrani, 2019; Schøtt *et al*., 2017; Walmsley and Nabi, 2020) which may weaken the sense of generativity (Ragins and Scandura, 1999) encountered in this study (i.e. where mentor and mentee are from the same generation).

Other variations to our setting where our framework could be applied includes a focus on e-mentoring. Interest in e-mentoring and its effectiveness is growing (Lall *et al*., 2023; Murphy, 2011; Sanyal and Rigby, 2017; Spitzmüller *et al*., 2008) and here studies could compare the extent to which the benefits to mentors differ depending on the type of mentoring (comparisons between traditional one-to-one, face-to-face, vs. group and/or e-mentoring). Additionally, mentoring for specific groups/sections of the population such as Theaker's (2023) study of the impact of mentoring on female mentees could use our framework to establish the impact on the mentor. Issues such as these could be tested in future studies using our entrepreneur mentor outcomes framework as a foundation.

We tentatively suggested mentor outcomes may differ depending on how experienced the mentor is; specifically, seasoned entrepreneur mentors may benefit more from the notion of generativity (psychosocial outcomes), whereas more recent entrepreneur mentors may benefit from personal development outcomes. In other words, more entrepreneurial experience is likely to be associated with an age gap between mentor and mentee and so the issue of

generativity is more likely to arise. As outlined above, generativity includes the sense of giving something back and the satisfaction that arises from this, i.e. a psychosocial outcome. Again, our framework could be used to explore these issues.

In relation to practical implications, we distinguish between those setting up entrepreneur mentoring schemes, and the beneficiaries of such schemes (here the mentor as opposed to the mentee). With regard to the former, our framework helps us understand how entrepreneur mentors benefit and the challenges they may face. This should assist in supporting the design and implementation of mentoring programmes and would thereby serve as a useful framework for the HE sector in particular, which is increasingly under pressure to support graduate enterprise and the development of enterprising students (Decker-Lange *et al*. 2024; Scheepers *et al*., 2018; Quality Assurance Agency, 2018). However, our results may be transferred to entrepreneur mentoring schemes more generally, i.e. outside of an HE setting.

For example, the potential benefits to the entrepreneur mentor could be utilised to highlight the element of reciprocity in the mentoring relationship when recruiting mentors (cf. Garvey and Westlander, 2013; Won and Choi, 2017). Similar to studies in an organisational setting, based on the nature and levels of interaction in the mentoring relationships analysed here, we confirm that within an entrepreneurship mentoring scenario care should be taken to select and prepare mentors to ensure they are fully committed to the mentoring programme which does require a substantial level of commitment from both parties (Alred and Garvey 2010). In an organisational context the provision of time dedicated to developing the mentoring relationship can be provided by the organisation which has a vested interest in supporting mentoring, and indeed, often sponsors it. Outside of this organisational setting however, the entrepreneur mentor (and mentee) needs to make time for this; there is an opportunity cost. Again, this is where a study such as ours that demonstrates how mentors may benefit from such a scheme could be used to achieve buy-in from prospective entrepreneur mentors.

A final point to note is the nature of the mentees involved in the mentoring scheme. As identified above, despite scoring high on entrepreneurial intent (using Thompson's, 2009, measure), some mentors suggested not all mentees were wholly committed to entrepreneurship. This could be a result of their student status and this issue may therefore be less pronounced, and therefore less problematic, in a non-HE scenario. In any entrepreneur mentoring scheme it would be important to try to assess levels of commitment to the start-up endeavour at the outset.

With regard to implications for the mentor as a legitimate beneficiary of such a scheme, because the psychosocial benefits of mentoring for the mentor were so apparent in our study, a case can be made for more entrepreneurs to engage in mentoring, not just for the benefit of the mentee therefore but also for their own benefit. Even though the entrepreneur mentoring scenario is less hierarchical than in a traditional organisational setting, entrepreneur mentoring outside of HE should in most instances reduce power imbalances further. This might then lead to a more reciprocal, mutually beneficial mentoring relationship, both with regard to psychosocial and personal developmental outcomes.

Entrepreneurship mentoring has a wide range of personal developmental benefits, including by extension positive outcomes for the mentor's own business (e.g. market knowledge, insights about competitors, potential new suppliers) which are very direct, tangible benefits. Considering our findings, a case can be made that there is some shared interest (sector/market) between mentor and mentee. However, too much similarity may reduce chances of expanding networks and knowledge transfer.

A further benefit is the renewed passion for entrepreneurship that mentoring may awaken in mentors. Once a business has been established, challenges do not simply disappear. It is recognised that entrepreneurship presents a range of emotional challenges (Doyle Corner et al., 2017; Shepherd 2003;) and that these may vary depending on the entrepreneur's background (e.g. immigrant entrepreneurs, entrepreneurs with PTSD, see Miller and Le

Breton-Miller, 2017). Although time-intensive, the rewards that mentoring provides to the mentor should ideally outweigh the costs in time and energy associated with it. Our data certainly support this view.

Limitations

We acknowledge a number of limitations that further research could address. The study with its proposed framework, the first such entrepreneur mentor outcomes framework, generalises to theory (Williams, 2002); given the sample size, what it does not aim to do is provide any sense of statistical generalisation. It is also very context-specific, drawing on one institution in the UK. Whilst the sample of mentors here was fairly diverse, greater levels of diversity, also in relation to types of mentoring programme (e.g. online, group-based, varying levels of formality and so on) would be able to further refine the framework. We also recognise the very heavily service-orientated nature of the mentors' businesses in our sample. Research has identified that management practices vary by sector (Ho *et al*., 2023; Nguyen *et al*., 2022) and so further research drawing on a wider sector basis may lead to further adaptations to our proposed framework. Given the time-intensive nature of the mentoring intervention finding entrepreneur mentors, but also student mentees, that could be part of a mentoring scheme and then continue to fully engage with it presented a challenge. More wide-scale studies would benefit from funding to support the establishment and ongoing administration for such a scheme to be successful. Given the potential benefits not just to mentees but to mentors, and the role entrepreneurship plays in tackling socio-economic challenges as evidenced in attempts to develop public policy supportive of entrepreneurship (Audretsch and Fiedler, 2022) , it is hoped such funding may be forthcoming.

Conclusion

Despite growing interest in mentoring's potential in supporting entrepreneurs (Chang and Cheung, 2024; Kubberød *et al*., 2018; Lall *et al*., (2023); Meddeb *et al*., 2024; Radu-Lefebvre and Redien-Collot, 2013; St-Jean and Tremblay, 2020), mentoring's recognised contribution to entrepreneurial ecosystems (Drexler *et al*., 2014; Spigel and Harrison, 2017) and a long-standing acknowledgement of the reciprocity inherent in mentoring (Eby, 1997; Haggard *et al*., 2011; Kram and Isabella 1985), a focus on entrepreneur mentor outcomes has until now remained largely absent. This paper addresses this gap and, for the first time, records and places into a theoretical framework a number of potential positive impacts of mentoring for the entrepreneur mentor, both psychosocial and personal developmental with implications for the entrepreneur's business (see Figure 1); it does justice to the power of mentoring to positively affect both mentee *and* mentor. Recognising the important but under-researched aspect of context in mentoring (Chandler *et al*., 2011), this paper highlights similarities but also differences to the traditional organisational mentoring setting, and offers an indication of factors that will shape the entrepreneur mentoring relationship. We therefore believe our framework should help researchers to continue exploring the area of entrepreneur mentoring, and also be of some interest to those policy makers who see entrepreneurship as a means of stimulating and renewing economic vigour in their regions and communities.

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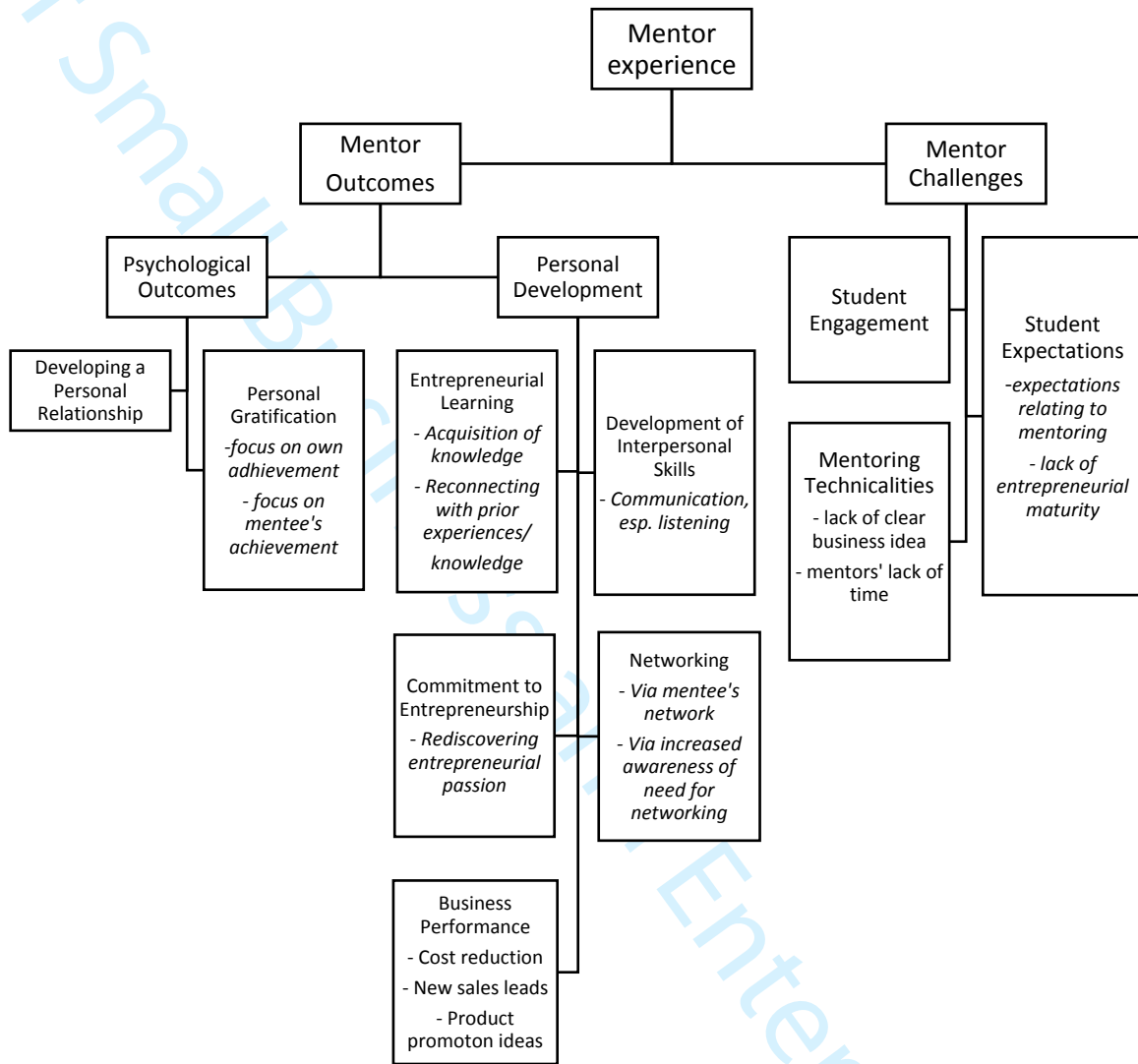Table 1: Mentor Overview

Name (not real name)	Gender	Mentor business	Years since graduating	Years in business	No. of mentees	Key mentor characteristics
Michael	M	Training company	13	8	2	Approached mentoring from a paternalistic perspective, so generativity played a role. Of all mentors he possibly benefitted least in terms of positive outcomes.
Mark	M	Media / Marketing	9	8	3	Variety of experiences across all three mentees. Firm basis of friendship with one of the mentees. Enthusiasm rekindled. Very positive overall about the experience.
Piers	M	App Development	13	2	2	Reflected a lot on how what he was advising related to his own business. Noticeable that this was a new entrepreneur and yet with lots of prior work experience. Beneficial also because mentees similar to target group for his app.
Murad	M	Media agency	7	9	1	Mentor was very supportive but also had a strong belief in relying on oneself. An element of generativity ran through the interview. Technical/subject-specific knowledge development limited.
Tareq	M	Marketing consultant/trainer	18	6	2	Two different mentees required two different types of advice. Mentoring benefits less pronounced because he conducts ongoing work with start-ups. In terms of interpersonal communication skills these have improved. Provided very detailed product/market advice to the mentees.
Ellie	F	Online beauty retailer	1	1	2	Quite a lot of impact on the mentor, also in terms of becoming more confident and real impacts on business (e.g. change of supplier). Reflection on own journey. Also has an informal mentor herself.
Nathan	M	Software development/Apps	16	16	1	Mentees benefitted but there is a gap between his expectations and what the mentees delivered, and yet he has now taken up other mentoring roles.
Naveed	M	Property services and development	10	7	2	Explains difference in benefits to the mentee based on their different stages in the entrepreneurship process. Reflects also on generational differences. Mentoring helps him

						refocus. Generativity an important feature.
Lucy	F	PR consultancy	2	2	2	Renewing passion, can relate closely to mentee's situation. Has her own mentor. There is an element of 'giving something back' here.
Amar	M	Translation App	5	5	1	Very supportive mentor, although the mentee needed a lot of support. Despite graduating relatively recently there are some references to generativity. Wishes a similar scheme had been available to him when starting up.

Figure 1. Entrepreneur Mentor Outcomes and Challenges Framework