Supporting and mentoring teachers

Setting up a mentoring programme

Setting up a mentoring programme can either refer to a programme of mentoring for one individual teacher, or to an institutional programme to mentor teachers within the organisation. In either case there are key considerations.

A. Steps in setting up an individual mentoring programme

1. Identify strengths and areas of development needed for the mentee

Before the first meeting ask the mentee to reflect on their own teaching and be prepared to discuss what they feel are their strengths and areas they need to develop. This can be done in a number of ways, for example, through self-evaluation of a recent lesson, seeking feedback from learners, or line managers, written reflection on an area of difficulty or challenge and also identifying areas of interest. Suggest they may make notes on their reflections or bring examples, such as feedback from line managers or other indicators.

2. Organise an initial meeting and establish a framework for further meetings during the period of the programme

The initial meeting is most likely to be exploratory, and, where the mentee is seeking a general mentor for all areas of their work, could include an in-depth discussion and evaluation of the teacher's strengths and weaknesses. In other cases, the mentee may need mentoring in a specific methodological area, such as monitoring and assessing learning or in teaching a new group or level/class. In either case the mentor needs to establish an initial time period for the mentoring process, whether they will be needed for any developmental observation, and set up regular review meetings.

3. Ensure that logistic needs to enable the mentoring to take place are met

The kind of logistic considerations include looking at the teacher's timetable, room availability and access to quiet, private spaces for meetings. Further considerations include the capacity of the institute to create opportunities for the mentoring to take place, whether it is a busy or quiet time of the year, and the fit with other institutional needs. The mentor may need to check with members of the management team to ensure that no logistic challenges emerge which may interrupt or hinder the mentoring programme.

4. Check that potential support needed is available

Support during mentoring is strengthened if required access to materials and resources are available, if allowances are made so that the teacher can be available at the required meeting times, and if line management is aware and supportive of the programme. If the teacher is isolated or subject to last minute demands, and the institute does not give weight to the validity of the programme then support is unlikely to be sufficient.

5. Review points and conclusion – what next?

The mentoring process should include regular reviews and feedback. There should be a regular feedback process both from mentor to mentee and from mentee to mentor. At the first meeting draw up a schedule for future meetings. The programme should result in a clearly articulated benefit in terms of insight, awareness and confidence on the part of the mentee, and the mentor should have evidence of a demonstrable benefit as a result of the mentoring. Not all mentoring processes are successful and the decision needs to be made whether to extend or cease the programme, and what future direction is indicated by the mentoring.

B. Steps in setting up an institutional programme

There is a strong likelihood that in any institution there is some form of mentoring which takes place, this could range from a minimum standard in terms of informal and voluntary mentoring or "buddy" process, to a well-considered and formalised process which is an integral part of the organisational culture of the institute. Therefore, setting up the process could include starting a programme where there has been no programme or mentoring at all in the past, to reviewing and enhancing a pre-existing programme.

Many, if not all of the above factors mentioned in the individual mentoring programme are vital as considerations to any institution, however the following should additionally be taken account of.

1. Identify the needs of the institution and the capacity of the teachers to fulfil those needs

This will mean either a formal or informal needs analysis of the institution as well as an examination of the teaching staff profiles. The needs will vary significantly not only in terms of what the present focus is, but any future planned change of direction. The overall aim of any mentoring programme should be to enable a closer fit between what the institution does, or plans to do, and its teaching staff. The focus for a mentoring programme may also reflect policy changes or directives from local or national education authorities. Programmes should focus not just on present activity but also future direction.

2. Organise a framework for the programme

This should set the process for the programme and the rationale for decisions in terms of who is to be mentored, and also who is to mentor. Essential considerations of timing, length of the programme, responsibility roles and monitoring and evaluation are also needed.

3. Ensure institutional capacity to run the programme

The organisation must make sure it has the staff with the time and essential skills required to run the programme, and to ensure that there are adequate resources in place. These include time set aside for the process itself, rooms and quiet spaces for consultation. Further requirements are usually staff cover where needed and agreement from diverse sectors of the organisation to work together to provide adequate resources for the programme to take place. Any mentoring programme has to be tailored closely to the institution itself, and there is no 'one size fits all' procedure.

4. Programme support

Any mentoring programme will need buy-in and support. This can only be achieved by acknowledgement and appreciation of a material benefit perceived by all those involved and their stakeholders. Key to success is awareness of its benefits not only by mentors and mentees, but also by the organisation itself. Ensuring success may involve promoting the programme and its benefits internally, inclusion of a wider range of stakeholders and recording evidence of results. The mentoring programme cannot succeed in isolation and needs to be embedded into the corporate/institutional culture and processes.

5. Future direction

The programme should both be informed by, in terms of responding to need, and also inform future direction of the organisation. The outcome of a successful mentoring programme should be to narrow the gap between where the organisation is, and where it wants to go. The key to success is a continued process of monitoring and evaluation.

Reflection

What information do you have on any existing mentoring programmes?
Are there any new teachers or teachers entering new areas of work? How can mentoring benefit them?
Have any teachers asked to be mentored?
What is on your list of difficulties and challenges for teachers in your institution?
What are the trade union or HR issues that might affect mentoring and observation of teachers?
How effective is communication between different departments?
What kind of institutional culture do you work in and how open and transparent is it?

Make notes on your reflections below.

Feedback

If there is a mentoring programme already in existence you need to research how best to work with this, and what support you need. There may be teachers who have performance issues, are very resistant to mentoring and who need guidance, or teachers who are new to the organisation, or moving into an area of work which is new to them. These groups of teachers need to be considered carefully. Teachers may have requested a mentoring programme, if this is the case it is probably reflective of a positive and open working environment and should be encouraged.

Research is needed into any restrictions on mentoring or the classroom observation that can accompany it. For example, in some countries there are union rules which inhibit teachers being observed by other colleagues in the classroom, and therefore other observation tools may be needed. Such tools may well exploit methods of self-observation using task sheets, video or other recording devices.

It is helpful if there are smooth collaborative channels of communication between different departments in your institution, for example between line managers, heads of department, head teachers, so that there is sufficient support not just for the mentee, but for the mentor and higher management.