Enhancing Professional Mentoring Programme:
Identifying Career Challenges, Improving Pairing Processes, and Strengthening University Support

Presenter: Charon Tsang, Evaluation and Insight Manager, charon.tsang@solent.ac.uk   APP Institutional Lead: Tania Struetzel, Director of Student Success, tania.struetzel@solent.ac.uk

Practitioners: Jen Little, Student Employability and Opportunities Manager, jen.little@solent.ac.uk   Ryan Boothroyd, Mentoring and Projects Co-Ordinator (Careers), ryan.boothroyd@solent.ac.uk

Vygo (Mentoring platform): Gaurav Deva, Partner Operations Manager, gaurav.deva@vygoapp.com   Lightcast (Labour Market Analytics): Carrie Williams, Account Director, carrie.williams@lightcast.io

Southampton Solent University

Introduction

Professional mentoring is a widely used intervention aimed at supporting students' career development by pairing them with professionals in their chosen industries. According to Musa (2025), it helps students explore career paths, build networks, and apply academic knowledge in practical settings. These supportive relationships can enhance students' self-confidence, especially those new to their fields, by increasing familiarity with industry roles and expectations (Wagh & Patole, 2015). At Southampton Solent University (Solent), the mentoring programme has been in place since 2017–18. The revised programme now focuses on achieving more targeted psychosocial outcomes identified in literature as barriers to career success for students from Asian, Black, Mixed, and Other (ABMO) backgrounds and from more deprived areas (IMDQ12), while also enhancing employability skills.

Career Challenges for ABMO and IMDQ12 Students

Lower Self-Confidence

Individuals with high self-confidence are more likely to take on leadership roles, engage in meetings, and seek career advancement, increasing their chances of success (Jones, 2024). However, Olszewski-Kubilius and Scott (1992) found that disadvantaged students with better skills often lacked confidence in making career decisions. Similarly, Edgoose et al. (2019) found that ABMO employees in healthcare often felt unqualified due to discouraging school experiences, leading to feelings of exclusion and low confidence. Lee and Cramond (1999) highlighted that sustained mentoring and supportive adult relationships significantly enhanced the confidence, self-expectations, and future outlook of those students, contributing to career success.

Lower Self-Esteem

Higher self-esteem is linked to greater career advancement and increased motivation to acquire diverse skills for the future workplace (Hamzah et al., 2022; Yuen, 2014). Weinger (1998) found that children from low-income backgrounds are aware of unequal opportunities, believing that wealthier peers have better prospects for success. Doi et al. (2019) further explored the link between poverty and low self-esteem, concluding that poverty reduces parental involvement, often due to poor mental health and limited social capital, thereby indirectly affecting children's self-esteem. Verkuyten (1998) noted that experiences of discrimination among ethnic minority youth were associated with lower self-esteem.

Pairing Process and Role Model

Many mentoring practitioners have associated mentoring programmes with role modelling, as mentors often serve as exemplars by demonstrating the skills, abilities, and experiences that mentees can aspire to emulate (Ryan, 2023; Gumeniuk, 2023; Roux, 2024).

According to social comparison theory (Collins, 1996), individuals model themselves after similar people within their social group. When people compare themselves to more successful individuals from relatable backgrounds, the assimilation effect can enhance their own confidence and self-perception (Guimond, 2006). For a mentor to be viewed as a role model, two key conditions are necessary:

1. Role model must represent the mentee's desired career goal: In professional mentoring programmes, mentors are usually selected based on the mentee's desired career. However, in other types of mentoring, such as peer mentoring, it's important to understand the mentee's goals and match them with someone who has already achieved those goals.

2. High level of similarity between the mentor and mentee: If a mentee wants to follow in a mentor's footsteps, they need to believe that the same path is available to them (Loue, 2011). For instance, if a mentor from a wealthy background shares that they reached their position by investing money and time to skill training courses, a mentee from a disadvantaged background might not see that path as achievable.

Enhancement Plan for Mentor-Mentee Matching Process

To expand the mentor pool in fields where mentors are currently lacking, such as science, engineering, and nursing, Solent plans to invite potential mentors using data from the Graduate Outcomes Survey. Having studied at Solent provides a shared educational experience that can contribute to a strong mentoring relationship.

Intervention Enhancement and Rationales

Since negative psychosocial characteristics are often rooted in personal circumstances and life experiences, matching mentors and mentees based on both career paths and protected characteristics can inspire confidence in the mentee and demonstrate that success is achievable.

Vygo, the mentoring platform, will conduct the initial automated matching based on selected criteria and generate a matching strength percentage for each mentoring pair. This preliminary match will then be reviewed and finalised by the programme practitioner.

Structure of Mentorship: Formal Mentoring vs Informal Mentoring

Mentoring is commonly classified into two main types: formal mentoring and informal mentoring. However, their relative benefits are inconclusive (Klasen & Clutterbuck, 2012). Formal mentoring, which involves a matching process, defined goals, and an organised framework, is considered more effective in supporting career development due to its goal-oriented nature, with mutual expectations prior to engaging in the mentoring relationship (Allen et al., 2011).

Informal mentoring occurs naturally, where mentor and mentee find each other, with minimal involvement from the organization. Since both parties collaboratively shape the structure of the mentoring relationship through mutual discussion, they have higher intrinsic motivation to participate, resulting in greater emotional benefits, such as increased satisfaction with the level of support received (Lockwood et al., 2011).
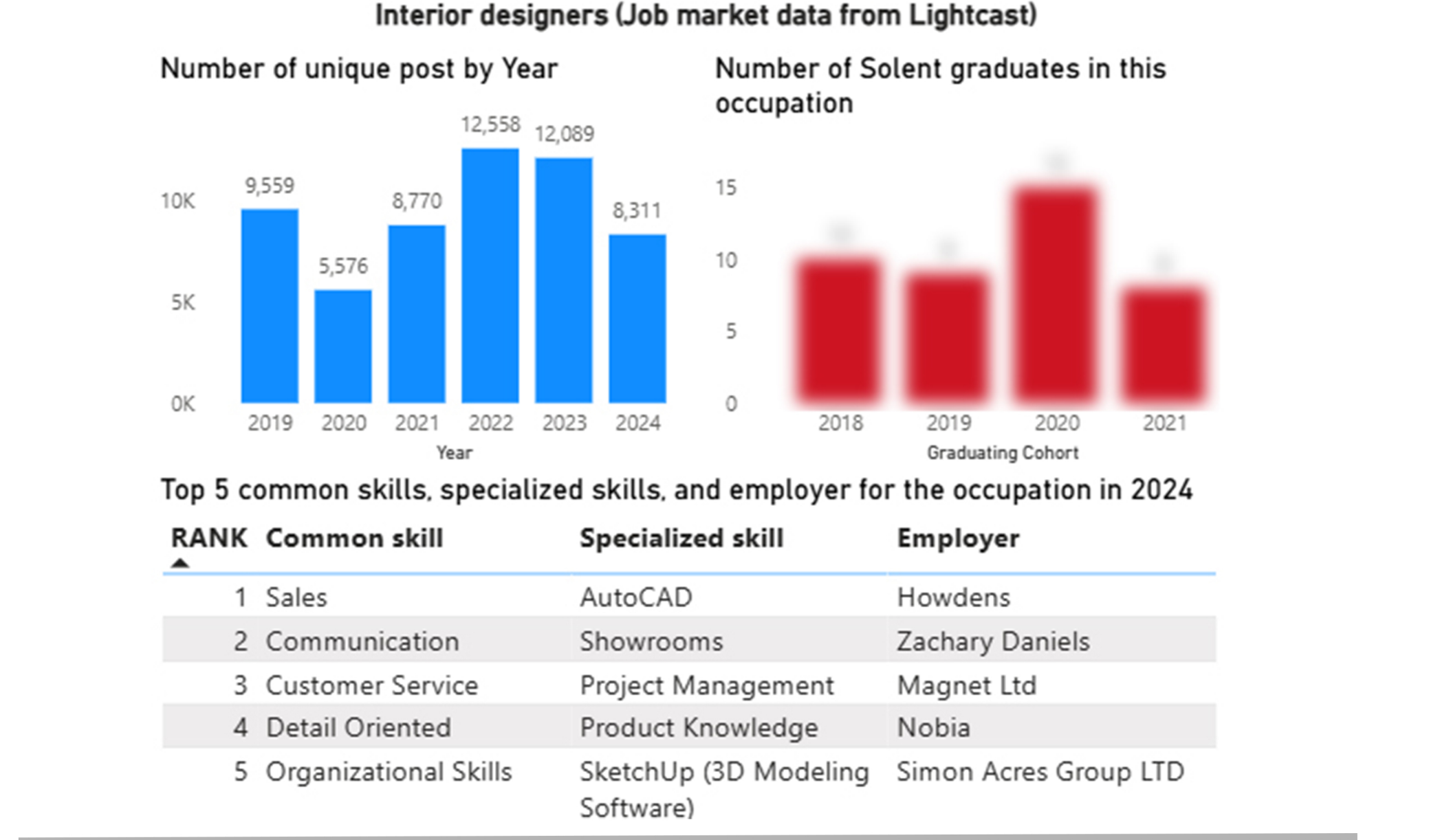
Enhancement Plan for Mentoring Structure

Given the inconclusive relative benefits, mentoring effectiveness may depend on the personalities and preferences of each pair. Some may prefer structured guidance if they feel uncertain about how to navigate their discussions, while others benefit more from a flexible, collaborative approach. Therefore, Solent will adopt a suggestive and supportive model, allowing mentoring pairs the autonomy to follow provided guidance or shape their own approach.

The guidance will offer a recommended structure with suggested discussion themes, including but not limited to:
a) Career goal setting,
b) Discussion of industry-specific information (e.g. entry requirements),
c) Sharing of job-related experiences, and
d) Tailored support based on the mentee's individual needs (e.g. mock interviews or CV enhancement).

Mentors and mentees will be given data from Lightcast, a labour market analytics platform. Mentors can use this data to reflect on how they've applied relevant skills and to provide up-to-date sector knowledge. This will help mentees develop a more targeted skills plan and prepare for interviews with greater confidence and awareness.
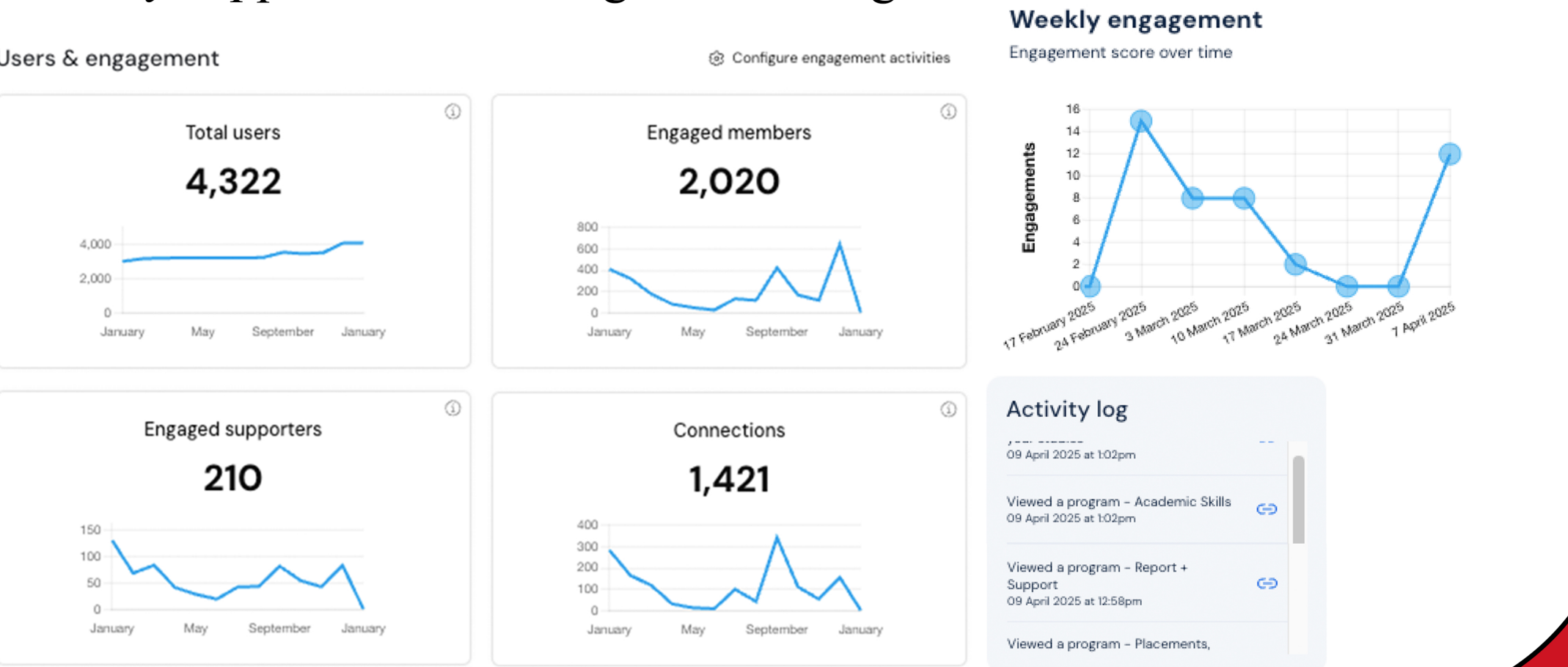

Top 5 common skills, specialized skills, and employer for the occupation in 2024

RANK	Common skill	Specialized skill	Employer
1	Sales	AutoCAD	Howdens
2	Communication	Showrooms	Zachary Daniels
3	Customer Service	Project Management	Magnet Ltd
4	Detail Oriented	Product Knowledge	Nobia
5	Organizational Skills	SketchUp (3D Modeling Software)	Simon Acres Group LTD

Enhancement Plan for University Support

Since it's inception, the professional mentoring programme was the shared responsibility of staff within the career service team, it is now overseen by a dedicated full-time staff member to ensure a single point of contact and timely support.

Solent also subscribed the Vygo mentoring platform to:
a) Share key information with mentoring pairs
b) Allow participants to request support from the university
c) In cases of inappropriate communication, the platform's records allow the university to intervene swiftly to safeguard the individuals involved
d) Monitor engagement levels and address low interaction through timely support or mentoring re-matching

References:
Allen, T. D., Finkelstein, L. M., & Poteet, M. L. (2011). Designing workplace mentoring programs: An evidence-based approach. Wiley Blackwell.
Collins, N. L. (1996). Working models of attachment: Implications for explanation, emotion, and behavior. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 71(4), 810-832.
Doi, S., Fujiwara, T., Isumi, A., & Ochi, M. (2019). Pathway of the association between child poverty and low self-esteem: Results from a population-based study of adolescents in Japan. Frontiers in Psychology, 10. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00937
Edgoose, J. Y. C., Steinkamp, L., & Hampton, A. (2019). A qualitative study of undergraduate racial and ethnic minority experiences and perspectives on striving to enter careers in the health professions. WMJ, 118(2), 60-64.
Guimond, S. (2006). Social comparison and social psychology: Understanding cognition, intergroup relations, and culture. Cambridge University Press.
Gumeniuk, J. (2023, February 9). Mentor vs role model – what is the difference?. Femme Palette. https://www.femmepalette.com/blog-posts/mentor-vs-role-model/
Hamzah, S. R., Musa, S. N. S., & Mohamad, N. (2022). The mediating effect of self-efficacy on career aspiration and organizational support with mentors on career success among Malaysian women mangers during the Covid-19 pandemic. Frontiers in Sociology, 7. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2022.802090
Jones, O. (2024). Personal development and self-improvement. Megann Publishing Services.
Klasen, N., & Clutterbuck, D. (2012). Implementing mentoring schemes: A practical guide to successful programs. Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann.
Lee, J. & Cramond, B. (1999). The positive effects of mentoring economically disadvantaged students. Professional School Counseling, 2(3), 172-179.
Lockwood, A. L., Evans, S. C., & Eby, L. T. (2011). Reflections on the benefits of mentoring. In T. D. Allen & L. T. Eby (Eds.), The Blackwell handbook of mentoring: A multiple perspectives approach (pp.233-236). Wiley Blackwell.
Loue, S. (2011). Mentoring health science professionals. Springer Publishing Company, LLC.
Musa, A. (2025). Mentorship in education: How students benefits from real-world guidance. Recorded Books.
Olszewski-Kubilius, P. M. & Scott, J. M. (1992). An investigation of the college and career counseling needs of economically disadvantaged, minority gifted students. Roeper Review, 14(3), 141-148. https://doi.org/10.1080/02783199209553409
Roux, E. (2024, March 18). Role models and mentors: Empowering growth. StellarUp. https://www.stellarup.io/blog-articles/role-models-and-mentors-empowering-growth/
Ryan, E. (2023, February 2). Positive role models in mentoring. Mentorloop. https://mentorloop.com/blog/mentoring-positive-role-model/
Verkuyten, M. (1998). Perceived discrimination and self-esteem among ethnic minority adolescents. The Journal of Social Psychology, 138(4), 479-493. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224549809600402
Wagh, D. & Patole, S. (2015). Mentoring. In S. Patole (Ed.), Management and leadership : A guide for clinical professionals (pp. 213-228). Springer.
Weinger, S. (1998). Children living in poverty: Their perception of career opportunities. Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services, 79(3). https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.993
Yuen, H. H. S. (2014). Seven Myths in Career Success. Christian Communications Limited.

Theory of Change

Situation	Inputs	Activities		Outcomes	Rationales and Assumptions
		Process	Outputs		
Career challenges for ABMO and IMDQ12 students: - Underestimating qualifications (Edgoose et al., 2019) - Lacking confidence in career decision-making (Olszewski-Kubilius & Scott, 1992) - Having lower self-esteem (Weinger, 1998; Verkuyten, 1998) and motivation to develop essential workplace skills (Yuen, 2014).	Limitation reported from participants, practitioners, and evaluators involved in the previous programme: - Inappropriate mentor–mentee matching and a shortage of mentors from the science, engineering, and nursing industries - Misaligned expectations between mentors and mentees, which weakened the quality of mentoring relationships - Mentor dropouts and the need for strengthened administrative support - Measured outcomes were unfocused and lacked an evidence base	1. 1 FTE practitioner to design, administer, manage, promote, and monitor the programme 2. 40 hours of practitioner manager to supervise the intervention. 3. 40 hours of evaluator to support the intervention design from theoritical perspective and evaluate the intervention 4. University funding for the project 5. Vygo mentoring platform to monitor the programme 6. Lightcast data to support the mentoring discussion 7. Jisc survey system to conduct pre- and post-programme evaluation surveys	1. Vygo set-up (Throughout summer and into start of term) 2. Application and pre-intervention survey (Mid-September) 3. Finalise mentor-mentee matching (Early October) 4. Induction programmes for mentor and mentees (Mid-October to Early November) 5. Mentoring begins (November) 6. Engagement Tracking (Every 2-3 weeks) 7. End of mentoring (May) 8. Celebration event and post-intervention survey (May)	1. Number of mentoring pairs (targets include: 30 ABMO and 30 IMDQ12) 2. Regular engagement between mentoring pairs 3. Feedback surveys and evaluation report	1. Increased self-confidence to become more adept at facing challenges and have better performance in the interview 2. Increased self-esteem to recognize and appreciate their own value and abilities 3. Enhanced employability skills to prepare students for entry into their chosen field upon graduation	Professional mentoring enables students to explore career options, receive advice on professional networking, and gain guidance on applying academic knowledge in real-world contexts (Musa, 2025). Such relationships can enhance the self-confidence of students, particularly those new to their fields, by increasing their familiarity with industry roles and expectations (Wagh & Patole, 2015). To enhance the programme, Solent plans to: - Improve mentor-mentee matching by: a) Considering both career paths and personal characteristics, informed by role model and social comparison theory, and b) Expanding the mentor pool using data from the Graduate Outcomes Survey - Offer suggestive guidance while allowing mentoring pairs the autonomy to choose whether to follow it, considering the benefits of both formal and informal mentoring - Enhance university support by employing a full-time staff member dedicated to managing the programme and subscribing to the Vygo mentoring platform