

**A Friendly Face in a Competitive Space:
The Impact of Mentoring on Student-Athletes in Gaelic Games**

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of Gaelic Games first year student-athletes engaged in a formal mentoring programme. The primary purpose was to identify the effectiveness of peer mentoring for student-athletes transitioning on dual front, while the secondary purpose was to explore programme design. A mixed methods research design was adopted. Mentees (n = 62) representing the four Gaelic Games field sports completed the Athlete Mentoring Questionnaire, then analysed using ANOVA's. While mentees (n = 32) and mentors (n = 7) engaged in focus groups, which were analysed using Reflective Thematic Analysis. Quantitative results indicate that mentoring had a positive impact on psychosocial and instrumental mentoring functions. Qualitative results explored a) the importance of dyad matching, b) the mentoring process c) mentor characteristics and motivations and d) the holistic benefits to mentees. Consequently, the findings have implications for the implementation of mentoring programmes in different settings.

Keywords: formal mentoring, mentees, mentoring functions, peer mentoring, programme co-ordinator

Introduction

The Needs of Student-Athletes

Student-athletes are a unique population who have additional needs to the general university population (Hendricks & Johnson, 2016). Due to their dual role, high performing student-athletes can struggle with identity issues, identifying largely as athletes first therefore finding it difficult to balance study and sport. (Comeaux, 2010; Geary et al., 2021; Hendricks & Johnson, 2016). As a result of this commitment to their athletic pursuits, availability of time and time management skills have been identified as a key barrier for student-athletes (Hendricks & Johnson, 2016; Pink, et al., 2018). With such challenges being more prevalent as student-athletes transition into first year (Bjornsen-Ramig et al., 2020; Kelly & Dixon, 2014; MacNamara & Collins, 2010). Consequently, tailored induction and support programs for this population may be required due to broader student entry programs being insufficiently focused to fulfil the needs of student-athletes (Kelly & Dixon, 2014; MacNamara & Collins, 2010). Therefore, due to the importance of student-athletes interacting with the college environment (Hendricks & Johnson, 2016) peer support has been suggested as a valuable tool considering the benefits of socialisation during transition (Budgen et al., 2014; MacNamara & Collins, 2010). Consequently, peer mentoring is a tool which may facilitate the successful transition of student-athletes into the university setting.

The Gaelic Games Environment

Although Gaelic Games are amateur sports there is an increasing level of professionalism at senior inter county (SIC) level (Geary et al., 2021). Despite several positive opportunities of playing at SIC level, there are several consequences. For example, SIC players mental well-being is below that of the general population and they are investing up to 31 hours per week into their sporting pursuits (Kelly et al., 2018). Furthermore, the Gaelic Players Association (GPA) have highlighted the demands on student-athletes across codes (Rodgers,

2019). The findings suggested that 54% of student SIC players regularly felt overwhelmed by their dual career, while 78% reported feeling stressed at least once a month (Rodgers, 2019). Academically, 35% of SIC players had to repeat a college exam, while 11% had to repeat an entire academic year (Rodgers, 2019). With such a percentage above the academic year repeat rate of 6% reported by the Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2021). The demands of training and preparations are significant for the student SIC player, as they typically attend third level institutions in urban centres, yet their SIC commitments remain in their county of birth. The commute to training can be substantial, over 90 minutes travelling in each direction for the majority, with 69% travelling from college to training at least three times a week (Rodgers, 2019). The impact of SIC commitments on their social life was also a concern, with 81% taking part in less social activities than their peers and negatively impacting their college experience (Rodgers, 2019). Consequently, student-athletes are susceptible to physical and psychological burnout, due to being misunderstood and identity foreclosure (Geary et al., 2021; Rodgers, 2019). Furthermore, during transition to third level a student's social capital (second level education and community status) and sporting identity can be threatened, increasing reluctance to engage in support services (Budgen et al., 2014).

Unfortunately, Rodgers (2019) highlighted that help seeking behaviours in this cohort of student-athletes are typically low, often waiting until 'crisis point' to address issues rather than proactively seeking support. With issues related to communication with SIC managers and their understanding of the challenges of being a student-athlete being highlighted as further concerns (Rodgers, 2019). As a result, the GPA have implemented several programmes with SIC players to try to assist with these issues, focusing on career, education, personal development, and wellbeing (Rodgers, 2019). When consulted, SIC players highlighted the demands on student-athletes with transitioning player's exposure to high training load, playing in multiple teams, exhausting travel and academic commitments (Rodgers, 2019). This led to

suggestions that student-athletes could learn from more experienced teammates (Rodgers, 2019). However, these support programmes are only open to SIC players, yet some transitioning student-athletes may not have reached that status, even though they are subject to similar demands and consequences. Thus, third level institution and county-based mentoring may assist these transitioning student-athletes.

Social Exchange Theory

As a theoretical frame for this study, Social Exchange Theory emphasizes a series of interactions that are interdependent and contingent on the actions of another person (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). It is suggested that all social interactions involve an exchange of goods, both material and non-material (Homans, 1958), with such transactions having the potential to generate high-quality relationships (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Therefore, the relationship between a mentor and mentee can be described as a social exchange between two individuals (Hallmann et al., 2021). Individuals engage in social exchange if the benefits outweigh the costs of the interaction (Homans, 1961). A key characteristic of Social Exchange Theory is the concept of reciprocity, a state in the relationship in which both parties are benefiting while expending the same costs (Foa & Foa, 1974). While a reciprocal state is not likely to occur in a social exchange, it is also uncommon that only one side is burdened with all the cost of the relationship while the other side receives the benefits (Hallmann et al., 2021). Mentees can receive numerous benefits from mentoring relationships. Mentors may receive benefits from contributing to their profession and intrinsic rewards from personal investment in an individual (Gillham et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2009), learning to refine their instructional methods and new techniques (Gillham et al., 2015).

What is Mentoring?

Mentoring has been defined as a process where a more experienced and knowledgeable person (mentor) acts as a role model, providing developmental guidance and support to a

novice (mentee) (Weaver & Chelladurai, 1999). Within sport, mentoring research, has been conducted in the administration setting (Weaver & Chelladurai, 1999), coaching (Chambers, 2015; Leeder & Sawiuk, 2021) and strength and conditioning (Gillham et al., 2015).

Mentoring relationships are typically viewed as either formal or informal in nature. Formal mentoring is when a third party facilitates pairing based on certain characteristics or protocols (Ragins et al., 2000). To facilitate this, specific methods for dyad matching have been outlined in the literature (i.e., practitioner assigned, choice-based and assessment based; Hoffmann, 2019). Consequently, the suitability of dyads is a critical factor in successful mentoring with Hoffmann (2019) stating that compatibility is not the same as similarity. Age and gender should not be an issue but on occasion it can be due to power dynamics (Smith et al., 2016). Such importance placed on dyad matching, points to the possibility of exploring the benefits of team or institution alumni mentoring (Bjornsen-Ramig et al., 2020; Comeaux, 2010). In comparison, Ragins et al. (2000) described informal mentoring as relationships that develop organically, through a desire to help or seek help. Therefore, informal mentoring relationships are characterised by high levels of trust and chemistry which can develop organically (Hoffmann, 2019). As such, informal mentoring can flourish because the relationship grows within a non-intimidating and familiar environment for mentees (Sandardos & Chambers, 2019). Consequently, researchers have highlighted one of the strengths of informal mentoring surrounds the friendship function, where the deconstructed hierarchy allows for healthy friendships (Park et al., 2017; Sandardos & Chambers, 2019).

Mentor Qualities

Softer skills such as empathy, emotional intelligence and trust have been identified by mentees as key characteristics of high functioning mentors (Blimper Jr 2017; Park et al., 2017; Sandardos & Chambers, 2019). Crucially, these characteristics allow for the creation of safe spaces for mentees (Sandardos & Chambers, 2019), which allows for mentors to deliver

constructive criticism and challenge mentees (Smith et al., 2016). Additionally, active listening, amongst other socialisation strategies was identified as a crucial factor in enhancing relationships (Carter & Hart, 2010; Hoffmann et al., 2017; Sandardos & Chambers, 2019). Interestingly, the strongest mentoring relationships were successful because of the development of a friendship function (Hoffman et al., 2017; Park et al., 2017).

Benefits of Mentoring

Specifically, mentoring has been investigated in tertiary sporting environments with student-athletes (Bjornsen-Ramig et al., 2020; Comeaux, 2010; Park et al., 2017). Of note was the need to create awareness for academic success and making mentees aware of the various academic supports available (Hendricks & Johnson, 2016). Mentoring support during the transition phase from school to higher education academically as well as sporting transition from junior or age grade sports to senior level was vital (Bjornsen-Ramig et al., 2020; Kelly & Dixon, 2014). While on the sport-specific side, mentors can be crucial to mentees attaining a higher level athletically (Hoffmann, 2019), with mentees identified as developing at a faster rate physically if they trained alongside mentors operating at an elite level (Hoffmann et al., 2017). Furthermore, mentors play an important role in liaising with coaching staff, thus reinforcing team messages and deconstructing communication barriers (Hoffmann et al., 2017). Mentors can experience a deep allegiance to the mentee, developing due to an affinity to a team or community (Hoffmann & Loughhead, 2019). Peer mentoring with both mentor and mentee on the same team has been shown to be successful (Carter & Hart, 2010). Furthermore, the mentor can be an important bridging person between a young developing athlete and a team coach (Hoffmann & Loughhead, 2016a).

Barriers to Mentoring

Consequently, mentees felt that peer mentors who “walk the walk, rather than simply talking the talk” was important (Hoffmann et al., 2017, p. 140). However, being a good player

or a good coach doesn't necessarily translate to being a good mentor, the characteristics required can be different (Kelly & Dixon, 2014). Several issues have been associated with formal mentoring of athletes including mentor mismatches, mentee neglect, time management issues and competition for playing time (Hoffmann, 2019). The issue of playing time was further exacerbated in the peer mentoring context, as conflict can arise around playing position and time as the performance gap in the dyad narrows (Hoffmann, 2019).

Programme Design

Appropriate programme design is integral to successful mentoring. Comeaux (2010) assessed a successful formal mentoring programme between student-athletes and faculty members which consisted of weekly meetings. This success was attributed to deliberate dyad matching and participant training. It was further posited that support from the programme coordinator (PC) and additional support network were needed for mentors, as it was felt that mentors cannot be expected to be all things to their mentees and themselves need support in their development to facilitate relational mentoring containing mutual benefits to both parties (Comeaux, 2010; Hoffmann, 2019). Furthermore, the importance of task clarity and goal setting at the beginning of relationship has been identified (Comeaux, 2010). Consequently, to further ensure dyad success, delineated boundaries and clear expectations are required to protect the process and the individuals (Comeaux, 2010). Considering the benefits of informal mentoring, due consideration for the facilitated matching within a planned mentoring programme is important in tertiary environments, which facilitate the strengths of the informal relationships being maintained (Hoffmann, 2019). As such, this formal programme aimed to maintain many of the strengths of informal mentoring, allied to a deliberate matching process. Initial training, followed by ongoing mentor and mentee support is pivotal. Utilizing mentors as signposts for mentees is crucial, thus educating them on the availability of supports within a sports organisation or university is important (Bimper Jr, 2017).

Research Aims

The research to date has looked at mentoring with matching based on a single criterion, where mentors from an academic faculty supported mentees (Bimper, 2017; Comeaux, 2010) or athletes without an academic background (Boroumand et al., 2017; Hoffmann, 2019; Hoffmann et al., 2017). This research aims to address this through a matching process which supports the student-athletes holistically. Therefore, considering the need to support Student-Athletes within a Gaelic Games landscape and the potential benefits of mentoring identified throughout the literature, this research aims to explore the impact of dyadic mentoring with Student-Athletes in a tertiary education environment. The research also aims to explore the importance of programme design.

Methods

Considering the context of investigation, a pragmatic approach was employed to provide practical solutions to contemporary problems experienced by people in social contexts (Giacobbi et al., 2005). Pragmatism focuses on what works in practice, guided by empirical evidence, rather than rigid adherence to certain ontological or epistemological assumptions (Jenkins, 2017). Pragmatism offers a flexible and outcome-oriented approach to understanding, in this sense, diverging from positivist and constructivist positions, rejecting the qualitative and quantitative divide, positioning both as valuable to unpacking real-world problems (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Thus, a mixed methods research (MMR) design was chosen for investigation. The PC was a co-constructor of knowledge with the participants (Giacobbi et al., 2005); a process facilitated through immersion within the tertiary Gaelic Games environment in this study. As the first author, the PC was an ‘insider’ to the environment under investigation, the second author acted as an ‘outsider’ to the tertiary Gaelic Games environment with extensive experience in another sport and as a researcher in sport. This ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ perspective was seen as a resource in the collection and analysis of data, as without this insight

there is potential for weakened theoretical sensitivity leading to reduced quality of findings (May & Perry, 2022).

MMR allows for offsetting of the limitations of individual research designs and allows for validity through triangulation (Sparkes, 2015). This triangulation was completed by the insider/outsider nature of the research team and by using qualitative data to inform quantitative data and vice-versa simultaneously. The validity of the findings was enhanced as the triangulation assisted understanding both the theoretical literature along with the mixed methods experimentation to allow for a greater knowledge of mentoring (Pashaie et al., 2023). The MMR design utilised the objective nature of the quantitative data to check for relationship strength, and the subjective nature of the qualitative data to explore the nuances of experiences. Consequently, the qualitative focus groups are the primary method used with the quantitative data contributing to a convergent parallel design. This convergent parallel design entailed collecting both the quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously at each collection point of the research process, analysing both data sets independently, but interpreting the results together to gain a rich understanding of how the different data interacts (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The convergent parallel design was utilised to remove restrictions associated with merely using one design type, and allowing the quantitative data to direct the qualitative data collection and vice-versa to fully interrogate the complex phenomenon in question (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017).

Participants

A purposeful sampling approach was employed for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). Embedded in a purposeful sampling approach is the ability to compare experiences identifying similarities and differences in the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). Participants in this study consisted of 62 student-athletes who were mentees and 41 mentors. We deem the sample to be

information-rich in relation to the aims of the study on student-athlete experiences of mentoring and the specificity of their own experiences in this phenomenon (cf. Malterud et al, 2016). Therefore, we suggest there is sufficient ‘information power’ (Malterud et al., 2016). Mentors were identified in the four field codes of Gaelic Games (Hurling, Camogie, Ladies Football and Men’s Football), mentors were all either institution Alumni or final year students, who had the same county of origin as their mentee. All the mentors also at the time of the research represented their counties senior team in their code. Mentors were contacted by the PC, where the programme concept was outlined in detail, with opportunity for questions provided. The mentees were all first year students transitioning to third level education in the same institution and also transitioning to SIC teams on sporting side. Some mentors mentored more than one mentee. Some mentees were already on SIC panels, while others had yet to reach senior status.

Procedure

Once approval was granted through the university ethics committee, mentees were selected from students who were on the institution’s Performance Sports Programme. The PC deliberately matched dyads, considering relevant sport, county, and academic course. While, also relying on mentoring literature across different disciplines, where many programmes have failed due to poorly matched dyads (Hoffmann, 2019; Sandardos & Chambers, 2019). Mentors were contacted with the opportunity to select from suitable mentees that matched the criteria of being from their county and being on the programme. Mentors could choose one, more than one or no suitable mentee, aligned to previous literature for student-athletes (Comeaux, 2010). Mentees were then informed that a mentor had expressed a desire to work alongside them and were they happy for the relationship to be facilitated.

Training for mentors consisted of an online video, outlining the programme, potential engagement methods and skills required. Mentees also received an adapted version of the online video. Both were provided with information on the mentor-mentee relationship and

ways in which it would function effectively. The online video included research and context informed information, details of the dyad matching process, initial meeting, benefits and ways of mentoring, and the challenges of mentoring. Mentors and mentees were given specific information that was pertinent about the person they were in a relationship with. Mentors and mentees were subsequently contacted on an individual basis by the PC to allow for questions and to ensure understanding of the video. This afforded both mentors and mentees a micro understanding of their role in their dyads. As per the details in the online videos, the exact nature of the initial meeting was left up to the dyad to decide, this freedom around engagement type was used with the aim of allowing for the strengths of informal mentoring to accrue (Sandardos & Chambers, 2019). The PC contacted participants throughout the programme and was accessible for ongoing support and supervision if required. This was required as mentors were engaged for exhibiting the requisite cultural capital (in terms of their status as SIC players), yet still needed to be supported in areas where they had deficiencies (cf. Leeder et al., 2019). Furthermore, mentor training rarely extends beyond episodic workshops (Leeder & Sawiuk, 2021) and does not guarantee meaningful and positive mentoring relationship, but can help to provide role clarity (Sawiuk et al., 2022), thus the need for ongoing PC support.

Instrumentation

From a quantitative perspective, the Athlete Mentoring Questionnaire (AMQ) (Hoffmann & Loughhead, 2019) was used for data collection at three points; pre programme (start of academic year), mid programme (post semester one exams) and post programme (post semester two exams). The AMQ is a questionnaire designed to measure mentees' perceptions of six (Mental Guidance, Coach Relations, Task Instruction, Career Assistance, Role Modelling, Friendship) peer athlete mentoring functions (Hoffmann & Loughhead, 2019). The reliability of the AMQ has been previously interrogated using a series of statistically robust analysis (Hoffmann & Loughhead, 2019). A reliability analysis was conducted on the six function AMQ, with the

Cronbach's alpha (α) = 0.968, suggesting that the items are highly reliable and consistently measure mentees perceptions of the athlete mentoring functions. The response rates to the AMQ were high with 56/62 (90%) completed pre programme, 59/62 (95%) completed mid programme and 60/62 (97%) completed post programme.

Qualitatively, focus groups were used as the means of data collection, this method allows for the gathering of high-quality information in a timely manner, facilitating interaction among the group about the phenomenon, sharing similarities and differences (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Nine focus groups were held with mentors ($n=2$) and mentees ($n=7$). The focus groups took place online through zoom, with 39 participants. Interview guides were created with reference to the literature and research context. The focus groups lasted between 27 - 39 minutes. The audio recordings of the focus groups were transcribed verbatim before analysis.

Data Analysis

All quantitative data was analysed using SPSS version 28. Descriptive statistics were produced to illustrate the differences in the AMQ at the three collection points. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. An ANOVA was used to explore difference between pre, mid and post programme. Additional ANOVA's were run on split files as participants were grouped to analyse differences across the following variables; a) alumni versus final year mentors, b) teammates versus non teammates and c) year intake.

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was employed to analyse the qualitative data (Braun et al., 2019). The PC actively engaged in interpreting data through the lens of their own cultural membership, social position, and ideological commitments, as well as their scholarly knowledge (Braun et al., 2019). However, the PC used reflexivity to reduce personal bias and reflect openly on the data collected. Furthermore, as the first author, the PC was an 'insider' to the environment under investigation, the second author acted as an 'outsider' to the tertiary

Gaelic Games environment with extensive experience in another sport and as a researcher in sport. This ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ perspective was seen as a resource in the collection and analysis of data, as without this insight there is potential for weakened theoretical sensitivity leading to reduced quality of findings (May & Perry, 2022). A six-phase analysis process was used. Firstly, familiarisation with the data took place by the first author, this engagement was trying to draw connections between data and existing literature to allow for direction of future coding (Braun et al., 2019). Secondly, generation of codes within NVivo. The coding phase in RTA is about focused attention, to make sense of data systematically and rigorously (Braun et al., 2019). Then, in depth searching for themes within the codes took place to assist in the construction of an insightful narrative around the data, where the knowledge of the second author was utilised. Then there was considerable back and forth between both authors reviewing, defining, and naming themes before the production of the final report. Rigor and trustworthiness were addressed via ‘a critical friend’, where an additional author challenged interpretation through a process of critical dialogue (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This process was not designed to achieve a consensus but encourage reflexivity and reduce bias, through the exploration of alternate explanations and perspectives (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Results

The means and standard deviation for pre programme, mid programme and post programme for AMQ are presented in Table 1. There was a statistically significant difference at the $p < .05$ significance level across timepoints for five of the six AMQ functions; Mental Guidance ($F(2,172) = 4.811, p = 0.009$), Coach Relations ($F(2,172) = 3.698, p = 0.027$), Career Assistance ($F(2,172) = 4.072, p = 0.019$), Role Model ($F(2,172) = 14.227, p < 0.001$) and Friendship ($F(2,172) = 6.390, p = 0.002$). There was no significant differences across measurement points for Task Instruction ($F(2,172) = 1.763, p = 0.019$) which would be considered sport-specific supports. Post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni methods showed significant differences

between pre- and mid-programme measurements for Mental Guidance ($p = 0.009$), Coach Relations ($p = 0.030$), Career Assistance ($p = 0.018$), Role Model ($p = <0.001$), and Friendship ($p = 0.004$). Significant differences were also found for Mental Guidance ($p = 0.084$), Role Model ($p = <0.001$) and Friendship ($p = 0.012$) between pre- and post-programme measurements. There were no significant differences between mid – post programme for any AMQ function. *(Insert Table 1 here)*

In Table 2, a further ANOVA was conducted and there was a statistically significant difference for final year mentors across timepoints for five AMQ functions; Mental Guidance ($F(2,65) = 5.310$, $p = 0.007$), Coach Relations ($F(2,65) = 3.594$, $p = 0.033$), Career Assistance ($F(2,65) = 5.715$, $p = 0.005$), Role Model ($F(2,65) = 9.739$, $p = <0.001$) and Friendship ($F(2,65) = 3.648$, $p = 0.032$). There was no significant differences for final year mentors for the Task Instruction function. The only statistically significant difference for alumni mentors across timepoint was for the role model function ($F(2,104) = 5.076$, $p = 0.008$). There was no significant differences for alumni mentors for the other five functions.

For final year mentors, post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni methods showed significant differences for between pre- and mid-programme measurements for Mental Guidance ($p = 0.007$), Career Assistance ($p = 0.008$) and Role Model ($p = <0.001$). Significant differences were also found for Career Assistance ($p = 0.028$) and Role Model ($p = 0.002$) between pre- and post-programme measurements. Post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni methods only showed significant differences for alumni mentors between pre- and mid-programme measurements for Role Model ($p = 0.011$) and between pre- and post-programme measurements for Role Model ($p = 0.036$). There were no significant differences for final year or alumni mentors between mid – post programme for any AMQ function. *(Insert Table 2 here).*

Table 3 shows the differences between teammates and non-teammates, the starting means for teammates were higher across all categories at pre programme levels and stayed higher at post programme measurement. Another ANOVA was conducted and there was a statistically significant difference for mentors who were non-teammates across timepoints for five AMQ functions; Mental Guidance ($F(2,96) = 3.989, p = 0.022$), Coach Relations ($F(2,96) = 3.899, p = 0.024$), Career Assistance ($F(2,66) = 3.888, p = 0.024$), Role Model ($F(2,96) = 12.989, p = <0.001$) and Friendship ($F(2,96) = 5.898, p = 0.004$). There was no significant differences for non-teammate mentors for the Task Instruction function. There was no statistically significant difference for teammate mentors across timepoint for any of the AMQ functions.

For non-teammate mentors, post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni methods showed significant differences for between pre- and mid-programme measurements for Mental Guidance ($p = 0.020$), Coach Relation ($p = 0.019$), Career Assistance ($p = 0.020$), Role Model ($p = <0.001$) and Friendship ($p = 0.003$). The only significant difference for non-teammates between pre- and post-programme measurements was Role Model ($p = <0.001$). There were no significant differences for non-teammate mentors between mid – post programme for any AMQ function. *(Insert Table 3 here)*.

In Table 4, illustrates that mentees who were on programme in cohort one (2021/2022) showed improvement from pre to mid and from mid to post programme, while for mentees who were registered on programme in cohort two (2022/2023) they showed improvements from pre to mid but this improvement was not evident from mid to post programme. This can be partially attributed to a planned PC disengagement of support from the PC to assess their role in the process. A final ANOVA was conducted and there was a statistically significant difference for cohort one mentors across timepoints for three AMQ functions; Coach Relations ($F(2,91) = 3.559, p = 0.032$), Role Model ($F(2,91) = 8.655, p = <0.001$) and Friendship ($F(2,91)$

= 4.331, $p = 0.016$). The only statistically significant difference for cohort two mentors across timepoint was for the role model function ($F(2,78) = 5.797$, $p = 0.004$).

For cohort one mentors, post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni methods showed significant differences for between pre- and mid-programme measurements for just Role Model ($p = 0.001$). While, significant differences were also found for Coach Relations ($p = 0.046$), Role Model ($p = 0.001$) and Friendship ($p = 0.024$) between pre- and post-programme measurements. The only significant differences for cohort two mentors between pre- and mid-programme measurements for Role Model ($p = 0.005$), with no significant difference across any function for pre- and post-programme measurements. There were no significant differences for cohort one or cohort two mentors between mid – post programme for any AMQ function. *(Insert Table 4 here).*

RTA was employed to analyse the qualitative data (Braun et al., 2019) and four themes were identified with a total of nineteen subthemes.

Scheme Design

The theme *scheme design* consisted of four subthemes, *other mentors*, *prior relationships*, *county link* and *scheme improvements*. Under the subtheme of *other mentors*, mentees talked about past mentoring experiences, and the strength of them due how they naturally developed; “I know him so long and I’m very comfortable chatting” (S14).

Engagements with senior players within mentees own club was an area where informal mentors appeared, “Just a couple of the senior lads, they’d bring you into the senior group ... the captain and maybe the stronger players would take you aside and give you pointers specific to your game” (S28). Teachers also offered continued support to students, “I wouldn’t have known it was like that, but I can see there were a few of my teachers who helped me in that way, but at the time, I would have felt we were just chatting” (S21).

Both the mentors and mentees awareness of their counterpart was explored in the subtheme of *prior relationships*. Some of the dyads already had established relationships because of being club mates or the mentee joined the SIC panel at a young age, ‘

Yeah, so [mentee 1] and [mentee 2], they are obviously from my club so I already have a fairly close bond with them. And then [mentee 3] I knew that I’d have a relationship with her going forward as I knew she was being called into the [county] (M3).

While for others there was an initial awareness of the other person. Every one of the mentees knew their mentors because of their status as a SIC player, “I didn’t know my mentor, I knew of him” (S28). However, some didn’t know of their mentees at all, “I actually wouldn’t have known much about them as they are from the other end of the county to me” (M4).

The dyad being matched according to their county of birth was an element of the scheme design which was acknowledged positively within the subtheme of *county link*. For example, “It just helped that we had those similarities as well, like so we bond more and it is easier to talk” (S32), and “I think it was a good idea to put us with people from [county] and like the way [mentor] choose us, it was easier to like contact them” (S31).

Both mentors and mentees reported on what they felt could be developed in the scheme though the subtheme of *scheme improvements*. Mentors outlined how important the introductory video was in understanding their role, “I thought the presentation sent on before was very helpful” (M1) and there was also evidence that there was learning gained from other mentors “I picked up a couple of things from this conversation alone, maybe things I can bring back now to [mentee]” (M1). It was hoped this could be part of the scheme in the future, “maybe going forward it might be an idea for mentors to meet together and talk about how they engage with their mentees” (M3). Dyads which had an initial meet face to face saw the benefit of this, “the fact I got to meet [mentor] in person, that’s a huge thing, adding face to face at the start could take the awkwardness out of it” (S25).

Mentoring Process

The theme *mentoring process* consisted of five subthemes, *initial engagements*, *engagement types*, *formal versus informal*, *relationship developing* and *friendship*. Dyads engaged differently in terms of their *initial engagement*, some meeting in person, while others engaged via text or call. Some mentees had trepidation about the initial meeting: “There would have been an initial bit of awkwardness at first, kind of getting to know each other” (S28). This wasn’t the case for all due to past familiarity, “I think it was good to link up with someone that you knew already because sure I wasn’t afraid to ask her anything” (S30). Furthermore, mentors were aware that the initial meeting could be challenging for their mentee, “how was it for them to meet someone they’ve never met before” (M2). This led to mentees gaining confidence by engaging in adult conversations, “I had to grow up a bit and take the first step and just kind of get over that first boundary” (S26).

Under the subtheme of *engagement type*, it became evident that some relationships were at times restricted to electronic means, “we did a zoom call and we were meant to meet up for coffee, but the way it ended up was that we couldn’t get the availability at the same time” (S16). This reliance on technology was identified as a barrier to a more meaningful relationship developing, “If you want to build up the friendship you’d need to meet up and talk over coffee” (S26). However, there were other dyads that interacted considerably more and had a strong connection, “they came to me with some stuff, around exams and stuff like that. They also do my course as well, so I think the way you assigned us couldn’t be any better” (M7). Furthermore, some relationships created a gym culture of passing down knowledge: “I actually done two gym sessions with [mentor] before Christmas because last winter, he got massive in the gym in terms of size in the gym ... he just showed me the ropes and that helped big time” (S7).

Both mentors and mentees talked about their relationship being casual and natural under the subtheme of *formal v informal*. This approach to the relationship was welcomed by mentees, “it was very natural, it wasn’t forced or anything” (S11) and “if there is no laughing or joking, if it’s more like a business interaction, it just seems verry official and not really too intriguing to connect with each other” (S9). While mentors expressed their view that they welcomed informal engagements, “I suppose I thought it was more formal but then things went on it became more informal” (M7).

This informal nature of the engagements had an impact on how the relationship developed over time, this was explored under the subtheme of *relationship developing*. The support was often present yet not overwhelming for the mentees, “I was happy enough, he didn’t disappear after the first conversation. He wasn’t hounding me or wasn’t on my back either. I just knew he was there if I needed anything” (S19). This support was particularly welcomed around exams, “he was an extra guy to lean on I suppose if I needed help” (S20) and as the mentees adapted to college life. “Especially towards the start it was helpful but since the first few weeks of college I haven’t spoken to him as much because I wouldn’t have had as many questions and stuff” (S27). Mentors also recognised a reduction in engagement levels yet acknowledged the informality of casually engaging:

They haven’t come to me that much. I don’t know if that is because they don’t actually need it or they don’t really have questions. I’d be more like talking to them at training regularly, but it would be fairly informal rather than direct messages (M6)

This leads into the relationship becoming more like a friendship which was identified under the subtheme of *friendship*. Mentees and mentors had varying responses when asked if their relationship was a friendship. The answers were split but there were factors which contributed to a growing friendship including trust and interaction level:

Yeah there definitely is trust there because I've met him a good few times now it would've started off about what I'm doing, am I in the gym and about nutrition and stuff, but then towards the end of it, it was just general chat, what am I doing, when am I back in college and my plans for the Summer. Its nearly a friendship at this stage but he's still giving me plenty of advice. (S25)

While playing on the same team was a strong indicator of a relationship being a friendship, "me and [mentee] have a close relationship, she is from the same club as me, so it's a unique relationship we have, you could nearly say she is one of my really good friends" (M3), while for others it felt a friendship was growing:, "with county starting possibly just going home on journeys is a lot of time that it could but at the minute it is probably more just mentor mentee kind of relationship" (M2).

Mentors

The theme *Mentors* consisted of five subthemes, *motivation to mentor*, *mentor characteristics*, *role models*, *mentor prior experience* and *benefits to mentors*. The *motivation to mentor* was multifaceted, with final year and alumni mentors open and willing to help a mentee. Mentors indicated the matching process linking them with someone from their home county was important; "when I heard that I would be helping [county] lads who started where I was as well and they both do [course], so I thought I could definitely guide them" (M7).

An additional motivation was their own experiences as fresher students, "I feel there definitely would have been a few questions I would have had myself, where having a mentor would have helped and made the transition easier" (M1). While another spoke about how having an informal peer mentor helped them transition and thus they were willing to replicate this, "I actually had good support, I lived with [name] and she was very good for me and I definitely think I found first year a lot easier" (M2).

This was further emphasised in the subtheme of *mentor prior experience*, where the mentor used their own experiences to assist the mentees. This was apparent with mentors, “I am just kind of using my experiences, maybe what I struggled with” (M5) and mentees:

He wasn’t reserved, he went straight into the last couple of years and exactly what he’s been doing, down to a tee. Just what I need to do to get to where he is, which was an eye-opener, just the amount of effort he’s been putting in. (S25)

The subtheme of *mentor characteristics*, provided an insight into the capability of mentors. Mentors highlighted how their family circumstances and profession guided them, “I am used to being a teacher, I know about taking responsibility for students or being there to help lads” (M4) and “that sort of leadership and role comes naturally to me. I don’t know if it is because I am from such a big family” (M3). Mentees described the mentors as approachable, humble and personable. This was further emphasised, “he is really down to earth kind of a fella and he’s really easy to talk to and you feel like you’re on the same level” (S10).

This was further expanded within the subtheme of *role models*, and its relationship to sporting performances. “He is a role model for me anyway, because he is still a young player, but he has achieved stuff that I want to do in the near future” (S32). Furthermore, mentees viewed balancing of different aspects of life as impressive, “he is definitely someone to look up to the way he is able to manage it all and still perform on the pitch” (S15).

In the subtheme of *benefits to mentors*, the mentors talked about developing their leadership qualities, enhancing their communication skills, and learning about themselves throughout the programme. “Leadership is definitely not natural. So it was great to kind of know that about myself at least and pin point one of my weaknesses”, this was echoed M3:

It has kind of given me the confidence to lead by example and offer that type of guidance to others. Whereas even beforehand I even find with the [county] panel that I

have taken on the role with a few other girls that are there and are coming into the panel and put myself out there too them, more so than I would have in previous years.

Benefits to Mentees

The theme *benefits to mentees* consisted of five subthemes, *education support*, *transition to college life*, *social life*, *sporting feedback* and *coach engagements*. The subtheme of *education support* identified how mentors assisted mentees on the academic side. The support was subtle, and it helped when the mentor studied the same academic course, “it is handy enough whenever I am stuck on anything, she is always there to help” (S30), but it equally was not a barrier if they studied a different course, as mentors acted as signposts, “[mentor] just made me aware that there is extra help available” (S14). Interestingly, the fact that there was so much focus on the academics surprised some, “I know this is a GAA thing, but with me and [mentee], we very rarely speak about hurling. It is more about college, assignments or whatever” (M5).

The subtheme of *transitioning to college life* explored the challenges of balancing a dual career alongside moving away from home. “The main thing I got would have been balancing the college and the county and starting up because in first year he would have had the same workload, and he gave me what he did” (S27). The mentors helped alleviate some of the unknowns “It was good because I hadn’t a clue what to expect in college” (S22) and “you don’t want to come across as this eejit who knows nothing about [city]” (M3). Furthermore, the travelling involved in being an inter county player surfaced: “You have to plan out when you’re going to eat, sort out lifts or whatever down to [county] so basically just be organised and don’t be leaving it last minute and giving me tips on prepping my food” (S11).

Mentors also assisted mentees in understanding the balance of being a student and socialising, which was explored under the subtheme of *social life*. Mentors encouraged the mentees to enjoy their third level experience “He was always asking was I getting out with the lads much and he was encouraging it” (S27). The mentor emphasised the reason for this, “I

was just telling him to make an effort to go out after freshers games. As I know for a fact the friends you have three or four years later are a result of those nights out” (M4).

Within the subtheme of *sporting feedback*, it became apparent that some relationships had no discussions around the mentees development technically or tactically, “me and [mentor] would be training with each other all the time, but like he doesn’t really discuss that a lot” (S21). However, with some relationships there was strong engagement in this area with considerable depth and honesty:

We’d have a conversation about what we would have done tactically in that session and what we can do better. We are able to talk from the perspective of two different positions. She talks to me from the perspective of the defender, where the forwards need to do this better, and I am able to talk from the forwards perspective. (S13)

A major challenge for third level Gaelic games players is playing on multiple teams and this was explored in the subtheme of *coach engagements*. The players are exposed to demands from multiple managers with limited understanding of the players commitments with other teams, “you’re sort of torn between them and you’re thinking “what do I prioritise? or where am I going to go? and I know she’s helped me out, with what she did when she was playing” (S13). These multiple team demands have led to injuries, “when I did pick up the injury and that I was doing too much, he was straight in with, ah you need to know when to say no and not to take too much on” (S25).

The mentors were able to give considerable advice around engaging with coaches and how to broach difficult conversations:

Talk to [college manager], talk to [county manager] as I know that was one thing that I actually did wrong, and I did suffer the consequences of it. So, I actually gave her my personal perspective on what happened to me just to maybe encourage her a bit more and I think she really did take it on board. (M2)

The mentors at times were using their own experiences of communicating with specific managers to guide the mentees in their conversations, “I would have based it off when I was in college and how we dealt with it. So that is just the advice I gave” (M6) and this enabled the mentees to have these conversations:

I’ve had the same managers as her from when she was in college too, so she understands how they both work now and that they’re both understanding when you talk to them.

And she was telling me what to say and how to go about it. (S13)

Discussion

Several important discussions points arose from the results on, the role of the PC in mentoring programmes, the gap around the task instruction function and peer mentoring types, which can help evidence informed decision making in mentoring programmes.

Programme Coordinator

The role of the PC is to recruit mentors and mentees, train mentors and manage programme expectations and delivery (Sawiuk et al., 2022) but the role of the PC and their influence on mentoring relationship in a sports coaching setting, has received sparse attention (Leeder & Sawiuk, 2021). Much of the mentoring research across all domains has focused on the dyadic relationships between mentors and mentees but that triadic relationship including the PC is an important area which can considerably impact the functioning of the dyad.

Here, the role of the PC can be separated into recruitment and ongoing support. The recruitment of mentors has been described as haphazard in sports coaching (Chambers, 2015). The identification of mentors and their recruitment in this programme was based objectively on their place of birth and playing experience. Such an approach has been both positive, due to accessibility (Hoffman, 2019), and problematic, as it was deemed to be mere geographical convenience (Cushion, 2014). The ethos of Gaelic Games generates a profound sense of loyalty amongst their membership (Hughes & Hassan, 2015). The PC also identified mentors meeting

the stated objective criteria on a subjective level, believing they embody a desired set of dispositions and attitudes aligned to the university and the sports programme delivered (Leeder et al., 2019).

The ongoing support of the PC to both the mentors and mentees appeared important. The PC who engages with the mentees regularly in the university setting may be able to flag social, sporting, or academic challenges they are facing with the mentor to allow for specific, and timely, support to be provided. The PC can provide instructional scaffolding to promote interdependency of the dyads (Vinson & Parker, 2019), but understanding the level of scaffolding that is required on a meso and micro level is crucial for effective functioning of dyads (Vinson & Parker, 2019) thus ensuring the benefits of informal mentoring relationships accrue within a formal scheme. Within this study, a designed withdrawal by the PC of engagement with mentors after the mid programme point for Cohort Two led to a decrease in mentoring function scores from mid programme results to post programme results (see Table 4). This withdrawal by the PC was in the form of the removal of periodic communication with the mentors around known pinch points for the mentees around exams and competitive games in their sport. This decrease in scores would be contrary to what was seen in Cohort One and would also be dissimilar to what was seen in previous research which indicates that effective mentoring relationships strengthen with longevity (Hoffmann et al., 2017). This is emphasising the role the PC collaboratively has in the process. This can be viewed as anointing the PC with the role of ‘long-arm mentor’ who fulfils a panoptic supervisory role supporting the mentor rather than the mentee (McQuade et al., 2015).

The PC has a pivotal role in ensuring that cross dyad engagement can be a form of social support. The mentors highlighted the social support they can provide each other and learning off each other about their experiences engaging with their mentees, suggesting that semi-formal workshops for mentors to share their experiences could be beneficial. In a student-

athlete – academic faculty mentoring programme, the PC offered optional support sessions where mentors could share their challenges and seek the support of colleagues to find creative and practical solutions to shared difficulties (Comeaux, 2010).

Task Instruction

The mentors within this programme all showed enthusiasm when the suggestion of mentoring high potential players within their own county was suggested. The affiliation between mentor and mentee was consistently raised by mentors regarding their willingness to engage (Hoffmann, 2019). Furthermore, intercollegiate athletes have been found to be motivated in supporting others well-being as it satisfied their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deal & Camiré, 2016). Surprisingly for a programme which is situated in a Gaelic Games setting, the functions of task instruction and mental guidance showed non-significant improvements. The social supports on preparation to perform, alongside their social and academic development rated considerably higher. This aligns with the motivate of supporting others well-being (Deal & Camiré, 2016), but it could be viewed that the less pronounced support on the sport-specific side is a negative cost to mentors, as it comes at the expense of challenging their own place on teams (Homans, 1961).

While the mentors in this scheme are all established SIC players, they are not seasoned campaigners and have only recently navigated the transition from underage to senior player themselves. Thus, some are potentially not assured of their starting positions within their teams. The issue of playing time was more evident in peer mentoring situations, as the performance gap is often narrower (Hoffmann, 2019). There is also the element of competing for similar positions which has been shown to pose problems with social support within team dynamics (Cope et al., 2011). The initial eagerness from mentors to assist mentees showed a willingness to support high status newcomers for the future benefit of their teams but the lack of significance in the mentoring functions over time for the teammate mentors rather than non-

teammate mentors shown in Table 3, suggests that willingness to help plateaued in line with mentees narrowing the performance gap. This could be considered the point of reciprocity in the social exchange where, for the mentor, in line with Social Exchange Theory, the costs begin to outweigh the benefits (Foa & Foa, 1974). This aligns with the research in an intercollegiate setting where mentors were less inclined to support high status newcomers than low status newcomers who played their position (Boroumand et al., 2017). However, research in individual sports shows that mentors could be willing to support high performing mentees despite them being competitors as there are considerable benefits to accrue to the mentor. This could be deemed a form of relational mentoring, where the relationship is two way, with opportunities for mutual learning and growth (Ragins, 2016).

Finally, one of the mentees (a forward) outlined how their mentor (a defender) helped them with their technical and tactical aspects of their game. This aligns with the findings in team sports that mentors are more inclined to support high status newcomers who played in different playing positions to them than high status newcomers who played in the same position (Boroumand et al., 2017). Considering this potential conflict from a playing perspective, it would be useful for PCs to consider if they value greater psycho-social or sport-specific benefits for mentees, when they are considering dyad matching.

Peer Mentoring

Based on the results from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective final year mentors appear to be more effective than alumni mentors. Feedback from mentees in cohort one of the programme, where there were considerably more alumni mentors than final year mentors, highlighted that face to face time was limited with alumni mentors and this was a barrier to developing strong relationships. Mentees also emphasised how important final year mentors were because they understood current processes in the university and were better able to signpost on academic issues. Furthermore, as some of the final years were playing alongside

their mentees, they travelled to training together, thus spending considerable time in each other's company. It is also apparent that the final year mentors were able to give a sensible perspective on balancing their college social lives. Even though being an SIC has been shown to negatively impact student's college experience (Rodgers, 2019), this has been managed appropriately. The peer mentor has been able to act as a non-judgemental signpost for addressing issue for mentees, described as 'silly little things' but helpful in stopping significant issue from developing. This is important as the help seeking behaviours in this cohort is often low, where they allow 'crisis point' to unfold rather than proactively seeking support (Rodgers, 2019).

Peer mentoring has been evidenced to be effective in sports coaching as there is a narrower epistemological gap between mentor and mentees (Olsson et al., 2017). Epistemology can be characterized along a continuum from naïve to sophisticated, with a naïve epistemology viewing knowledge as simple, specific and handed down, while a more sophisticated epistemological stance views knowledge as complex, uncertain and context dependent (Crowther et al., 2022; Grecic & Collins, 2013). Thus, this narrower epistemological gap means the peer mentor can provide effective contextualised support due to the relevant tacit knowledge they possess from experience navigating similar everyday problems (Nash & Collins, 2006). In terms of future identification of mentors, mentees indicated they would adopt roles as mentors themselves, to further reduce the mentor-mentee epistemological gap and allow for continued shared experiences at the same level. In line with previous research, this data suggests that those who received positive mentoring experiences are more likely to be good mentors themselves in the future (Arnold et al., 2021; Budgen et al., 2014). This is not to suggest that alumni mentors cannot be effective, the role of the PC to help facilitate the relationship at different stages may be important here, thus educating Alumni mentors of current available supports within the university is important (Bimper Jr, 2017). These alumni

mentors can also be important as they may be more established and view the mentees as less of a threat. Consequently, different types of mentor may be needed to allow the relationships to be successful.

Limitations

Despite the insights that have been gained from this study, it is not without limitation. No data was recorded to indicate if the scheme had any impact on academic progression or performance. Furthermore, all participants were students of the same third level institution, however the students played Gaelic Games across fifteen different counties, all at varying level of national competitiveness. A further limitation of the study was the lack of exploration of the experiences of the mentors within the study. Exploring this in future would be welcomed by researchers and would add considerably to understanding the experiences of mentors within dyads.

Conclusion

The quantitative and qualitative results indicate that peer mentoring is an effective tool to assist student athletes as they transition in both a sport-specific and academic context. The results show that mentoring can support the needs of student athletes on both an instrumental and psychosocial side. We believe there is transferability for mentoring beyond the context of this current study, but a simple copy and paste implementation is likely to be suboptimal. Considering the evidence that the sport-specific support was not as impactful as many of the psycho-social functions, we believe there is transferability for similarly run programmes across different sporting contexts, however a simple copy and paste implementation is likely to be suboptimal, as it fails to consider context specific nuances (Collins et al., 2022). Several key themes were identified for future practice. Firstly, the role of the PC has been identified as crucial to ensure effective dyad functioning. Mentor and mentee recruitment, initial training and understanding the required level of ongoing support the dyad needs all need to be carefully

managed by the PC. Secondly, the programmes responsibility resting within the athlete's primary team may allow for further support and development on the task instruction side, assisting with team dynamics and functioning. Thirdly, peer mentoring does appear to be effective so the closeness of the dyads in age, performance and career paths may allow for greatest coherence.

In terms of future research, it is worth further exploration of the role of the PC, which has been started in a sporting environment (Sawiuk et al., 2022), but requires further investigation across different sporting environments. A conceptual analysis on the role of the PC in working with and around barriers to optimize practice, while also utilising negative case studies as a critical learning factor for evidence informed real world practice is welcomed (cf. Taylor & Collins, 2021). The evidence here also suggests that one mentor may not be able to support all the needs of a mentee, thus moving beyond dyadic mentoring to triadic or multiple mentor support is worth further exploration. Exploring the possibilities of cross organisation mentoring of student-athletes is also worthy of exploration, as where the mentoring support rests may dictate whether the support leans more toward a psycho-social or sport-specific focus. This collaborative approach from expert areas may assist the student-athletes in a balanced manner. In conclusion, the results of this research have implications for practitioners, namely coaches and organisation to explore options to facilitate connections between existing players and underage talent who are experiencing transition in different areas.

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