



Q&A With Our Mentors

At our annual TAI mentor development workshop we invite several previous mentors to join us for a panel discussion and Q&A with incoming mentors.

Given the present online context, this year we have invited 2020 TAI mentors to share their experiences of mentoring with you in writing.

Questions which mentors have been asked to consider include: “What do you wish you knew when you started mentoring?”, “What are the best things about mentoring?” and “How did you cope with balancing mentoring with academic life?”

We thank Annelisa (not pictured), Athabile, Busiswa, Olwethu and Siphosethu for sharing their experiences and learning with us.



**Student Peer
Mentoring Programme**
TROJAN ACADEMIC INITIATIVE



RHODES UNIVERSITY
Where leaders learn

What do you wish you knew when you started mentoring?



ATHABILE

Mentoring is challenging and harder than I ever thought. I wish I knew that mentoring takes more than just time, it takes commitment, sympathy, and dedication. As a mentor, you become responsible for a lot of things and you must account. You become responsible for guidance, advice, direction, and the most important part you become responsible for a soul, therefore, mentoring it is not an easy journey. It pushes buttons that you didn't even know you had - it brings to the fore emotions you didn't know exist. Sometimes it will put a strain on your academic life, but the efforts you put benefits your life forever.

“ I wish I knew that mentoring takes more than just time, it takes commitment, sympathy, and dedication. ”

ANNELISA

The best thing about mentoring firstly, it was the experience from the training that is you get to learn how to be a good mentor not only that but learn communication skills, interact with other mentors and get to have a support system from other mentors but the best thing about mentoring that stood out for me was knowing that I get to help my mentees and provide a good support system for them whenever they needed me. The weekly meeting were also the best things whereby we talked about issues that they are facing and providing possible solutions with the other mentees and myself, The communication and the relationship I had with my mentees was the best thing and also the feeling of gratitude that I was helping someone was the best.


BUSISWA

I must say at first, I was scared of becoming a mentor because I'm shy person so having to be mentor and try to communicate with new people that I don't know was frightening me. But when I finally met with my mentees that changed because me and mentees, we built some friendship which made it easy for me to communicate and also allows them to be comfortable around me. We built relationship outside mentoring we became more like sisters. Mentorship created a platform to be yourself and be free around each other. My mentees at first, they were bit shy and they didn't know each other that much but because of mentoring they ended up becoming friends and helping each other with academics. As this year we were facing pandemic we needed each other more and since it was difficult time being there for each other and guiding each other was the best thing that came out of the mentoring. Also, our facilitator made it easy to do mentoring in that she was guiding us throughout the year and it just became easier and easier. The level of confidence got boosted because of mentorship programme.

What are the best things about mentoring?

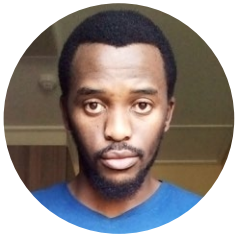

OLWETHU

One of the outstanding things for me about mentoring is getting to work with people. That helped improve my communication skills, and that will help in terms of my career. Mentoring for me was also about learning about and from my mentees, I also learned from them as much as they learned from me. So the best thing about it was sharing experiences with each other, not only academic experiences but life experiences as well.

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What are the worst things about mentoring?



OLWETHU

The first thing about mentoring was setting up a schedule that was going to work for everyone, for some students time was an issue since we had tutorials as well. Apart from getting a free period, another issue is within the group, for some mentees it is not easy to open up to a stranger (the mentor), but a way around that was for them to not feel any pressure or feel as if they are forced. Sometimes mentees would cancel at the last minute or even worse, not cancel at all and just decide not to show up at the agreed time

How did you cope with balancing mentoring with academic life?

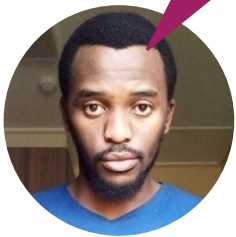


SIPHOSETHU

I always made a schedule for myself and mentees and we did our sessions during our free periods during the week then on weekends I would help them with any explanations they needed with an assignment or test but did not do the actual work for them.

“ I always made a schedule for myself and mentees... ”

How can a mentor engage with a mentee who is not contributing?

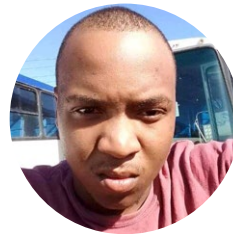

OLWETHU

One thing that helped the most for me were the quizzes that were in the booklet we were given. Those quizzes required everyone to give an input, so that would make things easier for everyone to engage as some of the questions were funny. For me, what would help the most with someone who is not contributing is opening up to the mentees about yourself and experiences. When they see how open and free you are with them, they will also find it easy to contribute. What helps the most is not enforcing that mentor-mentee relationship, once they sense that they are respected and valued as students as well, then they will easily open up and contribute. Lastly, it is important for a mentor to treat the sessions as a space of having a free conversation instead of asking specific questions one by one.


SIPHOSETHU

Because I had to mentor a group what I did was to ask a question everyone in the group would have a chance to answer and I would also have a small ice breaker games where everyone would participate.

How can a mentor deal with a mentee who is dominating the conversations?


SIPHOSETHU

Like my previous answer I would make sure that I would ask one question and everyone in the group would have a chance to answer and I would also set a stopwatch on my phone so that everyone can have the same time to answer as well as everyone have an opportunity to participate before the session is over and also have a private session with the mentee in case they have more questions or conversations in case they are shy in front of others.

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How have you changed/ developed/learned things through being a mentor?

ANNELISA

What I learned through being a mentor was that being a mentor does not mean being in control and that there will be situations where you are not going to be in control of for example the biggest challenge that I faced was my mentees sometimes not showing up for our meetings and not communicating with me that they won't make it, this made me learn that in mentoring there will be situations which I have no control over and if I face those challenges I must come up with solutions. Lastly through mentoring I learned time management which I was struggling with before I was a mentor. I also learned through conversations and interacting with my mentees that people are different therefore an approach that works for 1 mentee will not necessarily work for another mentee for example I drew up a study plan for my mentees without considering that the mentees are different in their study schedule and that is when they alerted me that it won't work for some of them. I learned a lot from my mentees through mentoring about myself and about other people.



ATHABILE

Mentoring taught me a lot of things and made me to look at life at different light. It is through mentoring that I realized that in life reflection is very important, it allows you to keep track of the things you did well and the ones you can do better next time. Mentoring helped me to develop my sense of agency through improving my abilities and capabilities. For example, it taught me how to be creative and make conversations with other people. In the process I developed an understanding that conversations are links and connects to open doors and make strangers to be people we know.



BUSISWA

Mentoring has helped me in various aspects in that it has helped me develop as an individual and it has changed my life through many ways. I have always been a shy person, I would be scared to socialise with people and mentoring has taken me out of my comfort zone in that because of mentoring I have gained a lot of confidence in myself now I am not scared to talk to people because I was forced to be there for my mentees and also help and guide them where I can and that has helped me a lot because I can see the other part of me that I never knew I had or existed. Mentoring has grown me as an individual. I also learnt a lot of things because of mentoring things like being a good listener because listening is one of the characteristics that you need to have as a mentor. I was also willing to learn as much as my mentees learnt few things from me I also have learnt new things from them this has helped me to look at life from the other perspective in that mentoring has made me be open minded.

“Mentoring has grown me as an individual.”

How did lockdown affect mentoring and how did you cope with these changes?

ANNELISA

Lockdown affected mentoring in a sense that when everything moved online, there was no face to face interaction and that made me depend on Whatsapp to conduct our weekly meetings. This had a slightly negative impact on our mentoring sessions because some of the mentees would just not respond to me when I tried to have our weekly sessions via whatsapp and also since there was no face to face interaction I felt as if I was not doing enough because some mentees would keep quiet and not communicate with me about challenges they are facing especially now that it was online learning. How I coped with the changes was to be consistent and to reassure them that I am there for them every step of the way and I understand their anxiety with online learning and I am also feeling anxious. I made sure that maybe if I see that a mentee is not participating on the group I try my best to private message them and communicate.



ATHABILE

The implementation of the lockdown taken mentoring into unexpected contours. The change to blended learning affected a whole host of things in mentoring. It affected communication, face to face interactions lost meaning, and that made it very difficult to keep up with the emotional health of the mentees. This reshaped the way I understood mentoring and compelled me to seek new avenues to cope with the changes. Whatsapp became the main platform of gauging progress with mentees but the fluidity was not there anymore. Online mentoring created a vacuum of assumptions about how mentees are coping with life, stress, academics and all other stuff. This is to say that it was not clear-cut to see alignment, re-alignment and dis-alignment. I could not control much the process of appearance and disappearance of mentees on Whatsapp. In this way, the lockdown and the move to online learning compromised mentoring, it did not ameliorate mentoring but became a strain to mentoring.

Coping with the changes of lockdown retrospectively did not do on a large scale to the benefit of mentees. Even though I tried to cope through communication on Whatsapp it was limited as compared to how mentoring carried itself in normal terms. However, the brotherhood we created before the lockdown saved our group during the lockdown. It became the responsibility of all of us to make sure mentoring works outside the confines of university.



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BUSISWA

Lockdown affected lot of things such as our academics because remote learning was new to most of us. So, being first time mentor and have to be a mentor during lockdown was little bit tricky in that before lockdown happened me and my mentees we were at the stage where we were getting each other well and they were starting to be on their comfortable zone so moving from face to face mentoring meeting to online was bit difficult as sometimes they would take days to respond to your text and sometimes I have to be understanding since we come from different places and background so some were having network issues that led them to not be online and get the text I have them on time and now it was also tricky to talk to them as a group even though I did create a WhatsApp group, so sometimes I had to text them individually that did affect the bond that we were creating as a group.

Even before lockdown some of my mentees were shy so at least when we had meeting as groups they tried to participate and get out of their comfort zone so lockdown nearly took us to square one. I don't want to lie lockdown did affect mentoring but I did try to cope in the sense that I tried to create a safe space and made everyone felt comfortable in talking on our group and also did try to talk to the individually whereby I would lend an ear and do give support and gain also gained strength to them as we were going through some difficult time. I made a thing to be there for each other and help each other and them being able to work together and help each other on their academics.

“ I don't want to lie lockdown did affect mentoring but I did try to cope in the sense that I tried to create a safe space and made everyone felt comfortable in talking on our group... ”

