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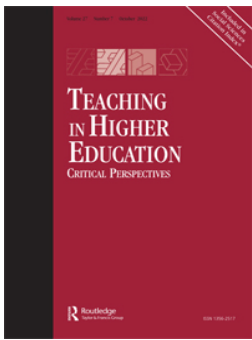
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# Seeing behind the curtain: Reverse Mentoring within the Higher Education landscape

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## ABSTRACT

The following article presents the findings of a Reverse Mentoring evaluation project conducted at a modern university in northwest England, which has a high proportion of students from non-traditional educational backgrounds. Using a reverse mentoring framework, the traditional mentor–mentee relationship was flipped with students serving as senior partners and their tutors as junior partners. The purpose of this study was to investigate how staff–student relations could be strengthened by gaining a better understanding of one another’s perspectives. The concept of institutional habitus provided a theoretical framework within which to examine disparities in mentor–mentee cultural understanding. Using a mixed approach to data collection, composite narratives were constructed. They revealed subtle cultural mismatches between the positions of mentor and mentee. The study speculates that by gaining a better understanding and appreciation of students’ habitus, more inclusive teaching practises can be developed to ensure the inclusion of all students.

## ARTICLE HISTORY



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Reverse Mentoring;  
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narrative

## 1. Introduction

This study analyses a Reverse Mentoring pilot project in a UK Higher Education (HE) institution. The study aimed to improve staff–student connections, better understand the student experience, and build an inclusive institutional culture. The Reverse Mentoring pilot project was conducted in a Northwest UK university, within a large sociology department, which has a high concentration of ‘non-traditional students’. This includes students from minority ethnic groups, first-generation students, mature students, disabled students, students with Specific Learning Disabilities, single parents, and students from low-income families (Budd 2017; Christie 2007; Cotton, Nash, and Kneale 2017; Holton 2018). This research was motivated by a commitment to educational equity, in which all students, regardless of their educational background, have an equal opportunity to succeed at university and upon graduation. Current data indicate this is not the case, culminating in an award gap for students from marginalised groups (Richardson,

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Mittelmeier, and Rienties 2020; Wong 2018; Wong, ElMorally, and Copsey-Blake 2021). To explore possible explanations for this disparity, the concept of organisational or institutional habitus (Byrd 2019; Çelik 2021; Ingram 2009; Reay 1998; Reay, David, and Ball 2001; Thomas 2002; Weissmann 2013) was used as a theoretical framework. This concept has been used to explain the structures that organise, shape, and constrain a student's learning journey (Byrd 2019). A reverse mentoring approach was employed to investigate potential cultural differences between the student and the university.

Reverse mentoring is a new form of mentoring used by organisations globally to develop their employees and expand their opportunities (Chen 2013; Kram 1983). According to a growing body of research, it is mostly employed in the workplace (Morris 2017) and is frequently used to engage younger, newer employees (Marcinkus Murphy 2012). Reverse mentoring is different since it focuses on developing a shared understanding between mentor and mentee, rather than passing down information from the senior party to their junior. In this instance, student and staff voices are both heard to better understand each other's perspectives and the environment in which they operate. Notably, neither voice should be heard in isolation, nor given priority. This paper aims to evaluate whether reverse mentoring can be employed in higher education as a way of better understanding the academy's complicated habitus through the eyes of the student. By investigating reverse mentoring at this one university, we hope to demonstrate that this pedagogical approach might enhance our understanding of the student journey and highlight potential barriers to success that certain groups may encounter.

### **1.1. Context**

Today's universities attract students from diverse backgrounds. To serve a diverse student body, we must design inclusive pedagogical approaches that leave no student behind as a result of institutional practices. The Dearing Report (1997) recognised that some groups of people were underrepresented in HE and so promoted the concept of widening participation (Thompson 2019). The report emphasised financing to promote the uptake of HE participation by underrepresented groups (Younger et al. 2019). Under this regime, universities could develop their own policies on who constitutes a WP student, although UCAS (2019) suggests such students include those from areas with high socioeconomic deprivation, low progression rates to university, low-attainment secondary schools, or low-income households. In expanding access to higher education, however, it is important not to lose sight of the heterogeneity and complexity of widening participation students (Thompson 2017).

The Higher Education Statistical Agency's (HESA) most recent figures (for 2020/2021) show an increase in 'non-traditional' student enrolment in England. HESA data (2022) show the ratio of Asian students rose from 14.18% in 2014 to 19.33% in 2021. These findings are consistent with the university where the reverse mentoring pilot was undertaken (20% as of 2019/2020). HESA data also indicate the percentage of students from low-participation neighbourhoods (LPN) shows a small increase from 11.1% in 2015/2016 to 11.9% in 2020/21; this institution has 14.7% LPNs enrolled. Similarly, the number of UK HE students who attended state schools has stayed reasonably stable at

about 90% across England, whereas the current university has 96.3%. The university's diverse student body therefore made it an ideal location for this study.

Despite these increases, students with non-traditional educational backgrounds remain underrepresented in HE (Gorard et al. 2019), especially at elite universities whose selection practices result in uneven and unfair access across certain social groups (Budd 2017; Younger et al. 2019). Non-traditional students are more likely to attend their local university than apply to a better-matched one (Budd 2017; Campbell et al. 2019). They are also more likely to apply to universities with a proven track record of supporting WP students (Byrd 2019). While non-traditional student numbers have increased, there remain significant differences in outcomes, including lower retention and progression rates (Thomas 2002) and fewer achieving good honours degrees than middle-class students at the same university (Wong 2018; Wong, ElMorally, and Copsey-Blake 2021). It was concerned over the differential outcomes of non-traditional students that drove interest in the current study. One focus was on whether such students possess the necessary cultural awareness to succeed in HE (Ivemark and Ambrose 2021). Institutional habitus (Byrd 2019) was used as the theoretical framework for the study as possible explanations for discrepancies in university student outcomes.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) introduced the concept of habitus to explain structural differences between groups, especially classed groupings. Institutional habitus is a set of durable social practices and beliefs rooted in the history and present context of institutions, making it a 'strong analytic tool' for investigating inequalities in education (Çelik 2021, 522). McDonough (1997), Reay (1998) and Reay, David, and Ball (2001) coined the term 'institutional habitus' to characterise an organisation's norms and practices (Kitchin, Telford, and Howe 2020). Described as the complex interplay of content, pedagogy, and what students bring to class (Reay 1998), it has been used to study how social power interacts with student habitus to generate distinct educational experiences and outcomes (Byrd 2019; Çelik 2021; Ingram 2009; Reay 1998; Reay, David, and Ball 2001; Thomas 2002; Weissmann 2013).

According to Byrd's (2019) systematic evaluation of empirical peer-reviewed research, institutional habitus is a collection of assumptions, norms, and expectations that contribute to differential treatment and outcomes based on race, gender, and/or socioeconomic class. Byrd shows how cultural and societal biases classify, privilege, and reward students depending on the possession and 'adherence to institutionally legitimised knowledge, language, values, and behaviour' (Byrd 2019, 193). The university's cultural and social practices favour the dominant group and disadvantage those from minoritised educational backgrounds (Byrd 2019; Thomas 2002). The habitus of middle-class students is more closely matched with the institution's, making it easier to navigate and flourish in a more familiar cultural environment. Working-class students are more likely to feel insecure about their university engagement than their middle-class counterparts, whose habitus provides the foundation for more secure participation within this setting (Abrahams 2017). Thomas (2002) suggests students from non-traditional backgrounds are more likely to disengage or leave the university if they perceive their social and cultural practices to be out of step with the institutions. She further suggests that when institutional and familial habitus are more closely aligned and non-traditional students' cultural backgrounds are valued, retention improves considerably (Thomas

2002). Arguably, widening participation discourse is framed around a deficit model, in which non-traditional students are expected to adapt in order to fit into the institution, and to become more like their middle-class counterparts (Hindle et al. 2021). It is within this legacy of inclusion and exclusion that this research was conducted. As advocates for equity in higher education, we wanted to learn more about the student experience and identify gaps in our collective institutional habituses to guide and strengthen existing practice. This paper proposes Reverse Mentoring as a tool to develop a deeper understanding within universities and the wider academy.

### ***1.1.2. Traditional and Reverse Mentoring***

The action of mentoring in HE is loosely described as the collective range of different relationships between a student and another (Lunsford et al. 2017). Traditional mentoring programmes commonly consist of mentoring relationships between student and student, student and staff or student or experienced peer, aimed at enhancing the success of the student (Crisp and Cruz 1990; Lunsford et al. 2017). Reverse mentoring differs from traditional forms of mentoring by the opening of hierarchies, fostering inter-generational connections (Morris 2017; O'Connor 2022). In developing the model of reverse mentoring in education, Zauchner-Studnicka (2017, 551) defined it as '... a reciprocal and temporally stable relationship between a less experienced mentor providing specific expert knowledge and a more experienced mentee who wants to gain this knowledge. The relation is characterised by mutual trust and courtesy'. Having been previously used in a professional environment, one of its core strengths is the expansion of opportunities for structural change and enhancement of employees' professional experiences within organisations (Chen 2013; Marcinkus Murphy 2012). Traditionally, mentoring schemes can be regarded as hierarchical and unidimensional (Morris 2017). By flipping the traditional mentoring relationships, the mentee, who is typically the 'junior' member of the partnership, then becomes the person in the more senior position (O'Connor 2022). By providing access to senior staff within the organisation, reverse mentoring creates opportunities which may not be available without the introduction of such projects (Clarke et al. 2019; Garg and Singh 2019; Morris 2017). In doing so, it enables junior mentors to grow in skills development, creating a space for sharing views and opinions on the same issue or point, whilst gaining wider organisational knowledge, through the reversal of roles. It allows senior mentees to gain new and 'fresh' perspectives on existing practices (Marcinkus Murphy 2012).

Within HE, reverse mentoring has typically encouraged students to develop and widen their opportunities through relationships with internal, external, and peer mentors (Clarke et al. 2019; Gündüz and Akşit 2018; Raymond, Siemens, and Thyroff 2021). Importantly, this approach in an educational setting can be a more effective dialectic tool, promoting the negotiation of knowledge and information rather than its unidirectional transmission (Augustiniene and Ciuciulkiene 2013). Unlike many traditional mentoring programmes, reverse mentoring can open up a space for two-way meaningful conversation where both participants have the opportunity to be meaningfully heard (O'Connor 2022). However, while reverse mentoring builds on the typical mentoring values such as mutual trust, information sharing, relationship development, and mentorship (Kram 1983; Valle, Lorduy-Arellano, and Porrás-González 2022), it is still unmistakably hierarchical in nature, with the more experienced mentor possessing all the

authority, knowledge, and experience necessary to guide the naïve neophyte within the organisational setting (Marcinkus Murphy 2012; Morris 2017). Indeed, it is because of such power imbalances that some are sceptical of reverse mentoring, as it might result in mentor–mentee failure and frustration (Peterson and Ramsay 2021). This is especially true when the mentor and mentee roles overlap such as is the case within the reverse mentoring relationship (Morris 2017; Clarke et al. 2019). Of course, this can be mitigated by externally matching mentors and mentees rather than allowing mentor and mentee to choose their arrangement (Zauchner-Studnicka 2017). This can be enhanced further by encouraging life histories to be shared at the start of their partnership in order to foster a sense of rapport and trust between the partnership (Kato 2017).

This pilot project recruited Level 5 (second year) undergraduate students from non-traditional backgrounds as mentors, with senior academic staff within the department as mentees. The objective was never to teach students about university processes, to raise their awareness of the institutional habitus or to simply learn more about the student experience. Indeed, given the heterogeneity of the student body attending university, it is doubtful such knowledge could ever be achieved (Thompson 2019). The intention was to use the reverse mentoring process to flip attention back onto higher education and begin to learn what students know about university structures. This, we believe, is an asset-based approach (Fox et al. 2020), which allows for greater fluidity within the mentoring relationship and grounds the encounter on the student's knowledge of university structures.

## 2. Methods

The sample for the current research was necessarily small due to the nature of the pilot study and the need to match students with senior members of staff. It used a mixed methods approach to generate a nuanced understanding of students' knowledge and experience within academia. Mixed methods have been used successfully in other educational research and evaluative studies (Bond 2014; Fitzpatrick 2011), so were deemed appropriate for this study.

### 2.1. Recruitment and matching

All level 5 (second year) sociology department students were invited to participate in the project. While we specified that we sought non-traditional students as mentors, we did not limit the number of students invited; those who replied were therefore a self-selecting sample. All departmental staff were also invited. Six pairs of student and staff participants were carefully matched by the research team. Students were matched based on their application information, the subject they were studying, and their career trajectory, if relevant. Staff were not asked to provide this information as their academic profile and professional interests were already known to the research team. Due to the sensitivity of the project, an advisory committee was established to assist the research team's development and management of the project. The advisory committee was separate from the research project team and aimed to protect the project and its participants. Data collection took place between March and June 2021 with university consent.



### **2.1.1. Data collection and analyses**

The qualitative data are comprised of 10 semi-structured interviews and two separate focus groups with mentors and mentees. Interviews had open-ended questions and were conducted at various points throughout the research. The initial qualitative analysis followed a constructivist grounded theory approach proposed by Charmaz (2000). This approach differs from traditional grounded theory as the researcher does not consider themselves as neutral observer, and the narrative is subsequently constructed by the researcher and research participants (ibid). Quantitative data were also collected throughout the project using an anonymous questionnaire which had both open and closed questions. The questions were kept deliberately broad so as not to prejudice the responses. For example, 'Could you tell us more about how the mentoring meetings have gone? Write as much or as little as you want', or 'Has any aspect of taking part in the Reverse Mentoring Project surprised you?' It was also essential that respondents could provide complete responses without jeopardising confidentiality. Discussion on the actual subject matter was therefore not required. For example, a question asked 'Please list 3 things you discussed in the meeting (no details please, just the broad topics)'. Twenty-four questionnaire responses were received from the mentoring partnerships. Participants were informed that neither the interview nor the questionnaire should refer to the content of the meetings, and neither should confidential information from the meetings be disclosed to the research team. The data were thematically analysed in preparation for the development of composite narratives. The thematic analysis was carried out by all researchers to ensure an inter-coder framework where transparency, reflexivity and dialogue were promoted within research teams (O'Connor and Joffe 2020).

### **2.2. Composite narratives**

The use of composite narratives in this study was selected to meet the methodological issue of presenting the depth of the participants' experiences while preserving participant anonymity and minimising the threat of individuals being identified in the data (Piper and Sikes 2010). A key strength of the composite narrative approach is in how it enables the complexity of voices to be heard while collapsing identifying information into a single story (Willis 2019). The characters are imagined but are not fictions. They are based on the data provided by participants and have been developed using the themes emerging from the qualitative and quantitative data. The characters developed for this study are Zara and Sami (mentors) and Alex and Max (mentees). Whilst alternative characters could have been developed had the data been combined in an alternative way (Willis 2018), the composites for these characters were developed where there were similarities in the participants' narratives. While the lead author initially developed the composite narratives, the other authors checked and amended the accounts again following an inter-coder framework (O'Connor and Joffe 2020). A conscious decision was made to not identify the numbers of mentors and mentees within each character due to the small-scale nature of the project, and to better protect the anonymity of the participants. The study team refrained from imposing judgement on the narratives, preferring to let the commentary emerge from the participants themselves. The composite narratives were given to participants prior to the completion



of the report; the replies we received from participants were that these were authentic accounts.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Quantitative findings

The top three topics of conversation discussed when mentor and mentee met are highlighted in Table 1.

Respondents were asked to list the top three topics being discussed at their meetings between mentor and mentee. Table 1 condenses the main topics of mentoring conversation, with university processes being the most discussed by both the mentor and mentee. University processes were a broad theme which often related to the discussion of academic duties that were frequently hidden from students. This was particularly true given the effects of the COVID pandemic which had resulted in a shift to online teaching that would be delivered in six-week blocks. In addition to discussing the role of lecturing, the other responsibilities of lecturers were examined, including how much time lecturers spend supporting students or preparing for the next round of teaching. Other topics included the justifications underpinning assessments, the choice of available options, and the reasons why dissertations were not required for all students in the department. Under the umbrella of university procedures, a more general conversation was held regarding the marketisation of the Higher Education sector as well as its future resulting from changes.

#### 3.2. Qualitative findings: composite narratives

##### 3.2.1. Student mentors

*Zara.* I mainly got involved with the RM project because I was pretty curious to find out how the university works: Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, I've felt really ignored and left out of any decisions that were going to impact on me and other students, so I also hoped to get a better understanding of staff, and maybe get a less reserved opinion of a staff member when it comes to university practices and policies. Although I was interested in changing the dynamic between staff and student, I did have concerns whether this shift would come naturally.

I met my mentee every two weeks: at first I wasn't sure it would go well, because I was doubting myself, but I agreed with my mentee that I would take responsibility for arranging the meetings, and I learnt to lead the meeting (although ending the meeting was difficult, especially at first as we could have talked for hours!) I liked that we had leeway to decide what to talk about, we'd start off with a catch-up and then talk about

**Table 1.** Topics discussed at meetings.

	Staff mentee	Student mentor
University processes	16 times	24 times
Better understanding of each other	19 times	16 times
Personal backgrounds and experiences	10 times	2 times
Careers, goals and motivations	5 times	4 times

one of the topics, or we'd talk about something else completely. Me and my mentor both have busy lives, so at the start of each session, we would spend the first 15 min having a catch up, how've you been, what have you been up to, and then we'd get into what we wanted to talk about, which was mostly about university life and how we both find it. There was a lot of comfort and safety in that space and the relationship was amazing. Because of that, I wasn't really aware of the power dynamic that usually exists between staff and students, I just felt that we were both improving, not just in a professional way but also in a more human way, we were both becoming more understanding. It was really good for me to see that everyone's human and we all have our worries and joys: you can tend to think that lecturers are good at everything, they do everything really well. So seeing that this isn't always the case has made me feel really comfortable about the future.

I gained such a lot from these mentoring meetings, I can honestly say that this has changed me as a person and given me a new outlook on things. I am a different person now, and that's because of reverse mentoring. I've got a plan for my career, and I'm a lot more optimistic now; although I know there will be challenges ahead, I feel like I'm in a better position now to deal with those challenges. I've also learnt a lot about what it is like to work at a university: before I took part in the Reverse Mentoring project, I thought that lecturers were pretty lazy to be honest, I never really considered the whole process of education, and would never think about what happens at the other end in terms of what lecturers do. But I realise now that there is a lot more to being a lecturer than I ever realised. I've learnt about what goes on behind the scenes, and it's given me a fresh perspective on university processes.

*Sami.* I got involved with the RM project because I wanted to do something that I could feel proud of myself for. I've said 'no' to other things in the past and then regretted it, so I thought this might help me feel like I've achieved something and build my confidence. Also, this year my academic performance has been pretty poor, so I wanted to take part in something that is connected to the university, but not directly connected to my university work. Staff can seem quite abstract, and I thought this project could help to improve staff–student relations. I suppose I wanted to gain a more holistic understanding of the university structure, to see what happens behind the curtain.

I met my mentee every two to three weeks, which worked well for us. I was quite nervous at the start of the project: I thought 'what am I going to teach my mentee?' I was quite daunted by the idea of taking up enough space to be the mentor when I didn't even feel like the mentee, but I learned to take the lead. I'm very similar to my mentee, so we got on well, and this gave us more understanding of one another. I think if we hadn't been so well matched, it would have felt like more of a 'project', or a chore, as the rapport wouldn't have been there. It's easier to do this kind of project when you feel friendlier towards the person. It helps to continue the conversation. I was a bit concerned about the power dynamic at the beginning, but it wasn't a massive issue for us. I was probably more aware of it towards the end because I know it's a busy time of year for all staff, not just my mentee, so it felt hard to say that I'm also busy, as it feels like my mentee was giving up more of their time. For the most part though, it wasn't an issue, and I'd say that the power differential balanced out between me and my mentee. I actually feel like we were both learning from each other.

I'm a lot more confident as a result of this experience, in terms of communication, decision-making, and dealing with people in a position of authority. One of the main things I have got from this project is hearing about my mentee's career path, and how they got into their career. When staff talk about their career history, it makes things seem a bit more manageable, which is obviously really helpful, as you don't always see the ups and downs of someone's career, you tend to assume it's quite linear. This has given me a lot more confidence in my future prospects. I'll also be far more inclined to participate and to speak to lecturers about topics that affect students; after all, they're human too. I've learnt a lot about how lecturers manage things and how much is (or isn't) in their control: it's definitely changed my perspective on how a university works, and how much power lecturers have. Both of these things have surprised me as before this project, I had a really wrong impression of a person who works at a university. I think I was also quite surprised because I didn't expect to see them not as a lecturer and more as a person, and for them to not see me as a student.

### 3.2.2. Staff mentees

*Alex.* I wanted to get involved with the Reverse Mentoring project because I wanted to find out more about the view of life from a student's perspective. I did worry that having a student mentor would be awkward, but we got on really well, and we're very similar in our personalities and life experiences, so that wasn't an issue. We also talked about ground rules early on, which helped to build trust between us, as it meant we were both clear on what we would, and wouldn't talk about. We met every two weeks: my mentor arranged the meetings, and I enjoyed having someone else arrange the meetings and take the lead in the sessions. I think the mentor having to take the lead helped to balance the power differential, although I think that if there was a power imbalance between me and my mentee, it related more to age and life experience rather than to a staff and student hierarchy. There was a good sense of rapport between me and my mentor, so it felt like a partnership where we were both benefitting and learning from our discussions. It definitely wasn't a one-way thing as we each assumed the role of mentor and mentee at different times in our conversations.

I was really surprised to learn how stressed students are, and how competitive they are with each other. I've learnt a lot about what it is like to be a student now; there is a feeling of perfectionism that they're chasing, which is both surprising and shocking. This process has made me think about how we can help reduce their stress levels, for example by talking more about how success is not always straightforward, because life isn't like that, but they don't take this message seriously at the moment. I think we should talk about our mistakes more, and how success often happens through these mistakes. I'm aware that my experience of reverse mentoring has started to change the way I interact with students, I'm approaching discussions in a different way, using what I have learnt from my mentor. I'm also more aware that as tutors, we might make students more stressed because of how we are with them. I'm planning to design in more opportunities within my teaching to encourage student's voice. I think we could take it for granted if it's not designed into our practice.

The other thing I've realised through this process is that even though we think this past year has been more informal because we've all been at home [*during the Covid pandemic*], students still see us in our roles, and think we are separate, and distant. I think it

would be good for our mentors to see us on campus, rushing to meetings, going to lectures and so on, because they would see the difference between you as a human being and you as a professional. It would help them to see behind the curtain, and they might start to think they can also manage the same switch between performances. Some academics might find that threatening, to be known as a human being and also a professional. I know that we need them to have a certain amount of respect, but I don't think that showing ourselves to be human will lose that.

*Max.* Reverse Mentoring was a good opportunity for me to reflect on my own experience, and to think about why I do things, and how I could do them differently. I also think there's a need for staff-student relations to be more transparent, so we have a better understanding of each other. I enjoyed our meetings; we met every two to three weeks, and my mentor was great, although I was concerned at the start about the boundaries that usually exist between staff and students, for example, whether I should remain in my professional role, and if I didn't, would it all become too informal. I needn't have worried, as my mentor took the position of 'what's all this about?', which led to some really interesting discussions. I also enjoyed having the tables turned on me, and letting my mentor lead the sessions. We had a lot to talk about and got on well, plus my mentor had a lot of ideas for things they wanted to talk about in our sessions. I'm not sure it felt like 'mentoring' though, and it definitely didn't feel like the power balance was an issue for us: it was more of a level playing field where we talked about things; I got their take on things, and they got mine.

I was quite surprised to find out that students see their tutors as pretty lazy because they don't understand all of the different things we do in our jobs. Because of that, they see staff in a particular way, so I know I need to explain the life of an academic to students at the beginning of each year so they can get more of an understanding of what a lecturer's role involves.

This project has made me reflect on our preconception of students, and how that doesn't reflect the reality for a lot of them, as they have caring responsibilities, jobs, and they take their studies very seriously: being a student now is so different to when I was a student. There is also a lot of pressure and expectation for students now, especially around graduate outcomes, where they need to get experience and get a graduate career straightaway. There needs to be more discussion of this as a process, and as academics, we need to talk about our own career pathways. Now I understand the different pressures that students are facing, and have more awareness of what it is like to be a student now, I'll be more mindful when dealing with students, and more empathetic in my conversations with them.

#### 4. Discussion

The following section reviews the research findings, where two significant themes have emerged. These themes relate firstly to the evolution of the mentor and mentee relationships ('Forming Relationships'), and secondly, to the way in which the social and institutional framework was unpicked and explored by mentors and mentees titled as 'Seeing Behind the Curtain'.

### 4.1. Forming relationships

In a traditional mentoring relationship, the mentor is the more experienced partner and is in a senior position to the mentee (Kram 1983; Morris 2017). While clearly beneficial, this top-down strategy in many ways privileges the status quo and unidirectional transmission of information. As such, the power dynamic between mentor and mentee is inherently unequal and presupposes the mentee possesses less, or a different knowledge base or experience than the mentor. It has little regard for the contributions of individuals in junior roles to the partnership. By contrast, a reverse mentoring approach is assets-based and infers both mentor and mentee bring some level of personal experience to the relationship. That is not to say power imbalances do not exist; rather, power is more evenly distributed than is typically found in traditional mentor–mentee partnerships (Morris 2017; Clarke et al. 2019). That said, it was still important to identify how this was managed within the mentoring partnerships. Both mentors and mentees were concerned at the start of the reverse mentoring pilot project about the existing power dynamic, and the impact this could have on the mentoring partnership. Our findings suggest the reverse mentoring relationship did indeed shift the power dynamic, and as a result, the partnerships quickly developed into strong and vibrant mentoring relationships that benefited both parties within it. All participants stated they had been well-matched with their mentoring partner, which provided solid foundations for developing rapport and establishing a positive mentoring relationship. Interestingly, mentors and mentees reported a sense of shared experience and finding common perspectives on points of discussion with their partner despite obvious differences in their positions outside of this project. This sense of shared experience, however, was not and could not have been a part of the matching process; rather, it arose organically as the relationships formed.

This sense of similarity, created by taking part in Reverse Mentoring, aided in the development of strong trust and rapport (Zauchner-Studnicka 2017; Kato 2017; Morris 2017); this in turn facilitated candid and comprehensive discussions of their individual experiences of HE. In most cases, mentees indicated that the strong relationship was built on a foundation of mutual trust developed over the course of the research. This level of trust appears to have been facilitated by the more balanced power relationships between mentor and mentee. The change in power facilitated a more comfortable, and in most cases, a more beneficial, mentoring relationship. Of course, mentees implicitly recognised they could not completely abandon their positionality, but power was less of an issue than they had expected it to be. This allowed the mentee to discuss things that would not normally be discussed with a student such as their personal backgrounds and experience (mentioned 10 times) and their career path (mentioned five times). They began to see each other as ‘humans’ rather than their assigned roles, which contributed to the strength of the relationships. This was critical to the research as the cultivation of rapport and trust provided students with opportunities to work outside of traditional conventions. It was the mentee who led conversations, scheduled meetings, and took the initiative; and through exposure to practices that they would not normally have access to, they developed a deeper sense of institutional belonging (Marcinkus Murphy 2012; Morris 2017). Mentees experienced a similar transition and began to see the person rather than a student. For instance, [Table 1](#) shows both parties gained a

better understanding of each other, with this being identified as a topic of discussion 16 times by mentors and 19 times by mentees. There was an element of surprise in just how similar in personalities and life experiences their mentor students were to the mentee academics. The ground rules of confidentiality created an environment in which they felt comfortable disclosing more information than they would ordinarily do when speaking with a student. Without such ground rules, the development of trust and rapport could have been hampered, preventing the partnership from progressing along mutually beneficial lines.

#### **4.2. Seeing behind the curtain**

The strong social ties within the mentoring partnership enabled both parties to see the perspective of others more clearly. Mentors in this project gained a better understanding of the institutional habitus (Reay 1998), referred to here as seeing 'behind the curtain' where university processes, institution functions and the roles of academic staff were often discussed. This is reflected in questionnaire results, which indicate university processes were the most often discussed topic at meetings, with mentors mentioning them 24 times and mentees 16 times. The high volume of questions on this subject does indicate a lack of awareness on the part of students, although it is unclear if this is unique to widening participation students or is representative of the experience of the wider student population. This misalignment of habituses is a key insight, not because of the mentor's lack of understanding but rather, that this mismatch was not recognised at the institutional level.

Seeing behind the curtain provided the mentor with a deeper understanding of their mentee's career trajectory, which was not as straight forward as it had first appeared (see Table 1). For institutional habitus, such knowledge is not freely available as part of academic practice, placing a greater emphasis on the subject being taught rather than tutor knowledge acquisition throughout their career. Given the increasing importance placed on the career prospects and graduate outcomes of HE students, the absence of such conversation can contribute to the mismatch in habituses, allowing the fiction of a linear academic trajectory to continue. Mentors found it reassuring to know it was acceptable to be without a career plan while still an undergraduate. The current implementation of the reverse mentoring model revealed a bidirectional flow of learning from mentor to mentee, who gained a better grasp of what happens behind the curtain in terms of the student experience and individual commonalities and perspectives. Given the reverse mentoring pilot project was established to gain a better understanding of the student experience, it is unsurprising that the experiences of students were an important discussion point within the mentoring meetings. Flipping the mentoring process enabled the mentee to gain a better perspective on student life. This includes the pressures students face and the impact university structures and systems have on them. Mentees developed a deeper appreciation of how a tutor's approach can contribute to a student's stress, which prompted them to consider how they can adapt their practice both in terms of their interactions with students in a learning and teaching environment, as well as in one-to-one conversations. Although several inclusive practices exist in the institution, including widening participation and first-generation support, prior to the Reverse Mentoring pilot, their current educational experience appears to be less well known.

## 5. Conclusion

The objective of the reverse mentoring pilot project was to increase understanding of staff–student interactions. It was always envisioned that the most significant learning would occur on the part of the institution, rather than on the part of the student. As such, this research has placed a high premium on learning about both the student experience and what the student understands about the academy, as these are the areas that would yield the most valuable data. By examining the smallest interactions, misunderstandings, and misunderstandings between mentors and mentees, it has been possible to identify a subtle mismatch between the institutional and student habitus. This mismatch, if unchecked, could result in the persistence of inequities, as well as differences in student experiences (Byrd 2019; Çelik 2021; Ingram 2009; Reay 1998; Reay, David, and Ball 2001; Thomas 2002; Weissmann 2013). The benefits of more closely aligning the institutional and student habitus can result in greater retention and progression rates among those from non-traditional backgrounds (Thomas 2002). However, it is important that the focus shifts to other areas of inequalities such as the award gap (Richardson, Mittelmeier, and Rienties 2020; Wong 2018; Wong, ElMorally, and Copesey-Blake 2021).

The current research speculates that being armed with a greater understanding of the misalignment of the institution and student habitus makes it possible to develop and improve inclusive educational strategies ensuring no student is left behind regardless of their educational background. The emphasis of change must shift away from the student and toward the institution. More transparent procedures are required, followed by a greater appreciation for the contributions students with non-traditional educational backgrounds bring to HE. Only in this manner can institutional habitus begin to be more closely aligned. In the current instance, this will require academics, and the institution, to pull back the curtain and present a more realistic picture of academia and the role of academic staff. It is this that makes the current research unique by suggesting it is the academy that changes its practices to better accommodate the diversity of student experiences, rather than the student being expected to change theirs. A meeting of cultures on an equal footing is likely to produce the best results.

This project is not without its limitations. Firstly, it was a small pilot project within one department in a higher education institution, during a lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, all meetings took place online, impacting the findings of this pilot project. However, by widening the research through another Reverse Mentoring project, this time with the involvement of additional academic departments, other faculties, and student-facing professional services, wider comparison of the findings can be made. In addition, it will be possible for the mentoring meetings to take place in person or online, depending on the availability of the mentoring partners. The only requirement is that the meeting place should be neutral; meetings should not take place in the office of the staff mentee. In spite of its limitations, this Reverse Mentoring pilot project has been transformational for the department. We have far greater acknowledgement and understanding of the difficulties students face, and how alienating higher education can be for some students. This has resulted in a departmental-wide project that seeks to enhance the sense of identity students have within our department, and which will entail a programme of events intended to embed a sense of community, and of belonging. It is hoped that by involving students to a greater extent in activities,



social events, and skills/professional development opportunities, they will be more likely to want to engage with us, to feel less ‘done to’ and more ‘involved in’, and that we can work to reduce the gap between institutional habitus and individual habitus.

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