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Title: Reflections of mentors and mentees on a national mentoring programme for pharmacists: An examination into relationships, personal and professional development

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Reflections of mentors and mentees on a national mentoring programme for pharmacists: An examination into relationships, personal and professional development

Abstract

Background: While mentorship programmes for professionals are growing in number, the lived experiences of mentor and mentee participants could be captured so as to better inform best practices and considerations for thriving relationships.

Objective: This study evaluated the lived experiences of mentors and mentees in a nationwide programme for pharmacists administered by a professional organisation in the United Kingdom, specifically examining the nature of relationships comprising those experiences.

Methods: A phenomenological approach was adopted, with semi-structured interviews conducted remotely between November 2019 and June 2020. Potential participants approached via a gatekeeper, employing purposive and convenience sampling. Transcribed data were examined using a combination of inductive and deductive thematic analysis and codes were assigned independently by two researchers, to increase rigour in analysis.

Results: A total of 20 participants described their perceived role in their respective mentoring partnerships, gave their own account of the definition of mentoring and discussed the crucial role of trust and understanding in developing a successful mentoring relationship. Mentors' beliefs on their perceived role in the relationship largely guided their approach to the structure of the interactions. The concepts of personal growth and development of peers were often discussed by the participants, along with the acknowledgment that mentoring is a relationship that ideally lasts potentially a lifetime, should the relationship be successful. Mentors felt a sense of pride in giving back to the profession. An unintentional unbalanced power dynamic was often reported and both mentors and mentees acknowledged frustrations when they perceived their partner was not showing the same level of engagement and commitment.

Conclusions: Pharmacists participating in a nationwide mentoring programme expressed considerable enthusiasm with their contribution, underscoring the programme's flexibility, its emphasis of mentoring versus merely advising, and its responsibility for enhancing or reconnecting with their professional identity as well as fostering more positivity and liveliness in their professional roles. . The programme might consider additional training to mentors to promote their own self-efficacy in mentoring, which among other things could curtail perceived potential power imbalances within mentor-mentee dyads and lead to a more dynamic and contextualised mentoring experience.

Introduction

Mentoring is an interactive, collaborative, learning relationship between a mentor and a mentee. The mentor is typically a more experienced and/or senior individual with a purpose of guiding the development of another. The mentee is a novice seeking to advance their skills, knowledge, and competence to succeed within their career and perhaps more broadly, life in general.[1,2] Within healthcare environments, mentoring aids in the mastery of higher-level professional skills and supports the protected progression of mentees.[3] Mentees additionally benefit by receiving role modelling, acceptance, counselling, emotional support, and friendship from mentors, which subsequently builds confidence and feelings of self-worth.[4] Empowered mentees are subsequently more motivated, which stimulates a need to succeed and enhance professional development.[5] Mentors receive intrinsic satisfaction by contributing to others' lives, observing their advancement and experiencing mentee gratification, thus realising the highest level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs - belonging and self-actualisation.[6,7] Furthermore, they benefit from self-enhancement through development of their own professional competencies and achievement of personal learning.[8] It is this pro-social, altruistic attitude that motivates mentors to participate in mentoring activities. Mentor motivation appears to be determined by an individual's characteristics, including mentor competence, personality traits, demographics, and job/career history.[9] In particular, motivation appears to be dependent upon the degree to which mentors value the benefits of mentoring. Mentors who display strong motivations for intrinsic satisfaction provide mentees with greater potential for advancement and psychosocial support.[10] Whilst mentoring has often been misinterpreted as coaching, and indeed many similarities may be exhibited in the approach a mentor or a coach uses, there are key differences such as the more structured nature and set duration of any coaching relationship, and the expectation that with coaching a specific goal will be met.[11,12]

Kram[13] described a linear mentoring process consisting of four discrete phases; a) initiation; b) cultivation; 3) separation; and c) redefinition, each stage driven by the needs of those invested in mentoring but also workplace objectives where mentoring is provided by an organisation. The mentoring relationship is a transformational process for both the mentee and mentor, with success being determined by an individual's characteristics, environmental factors, relationship features, and realised benefits, which subsequently influence the outcomes of the relationship.[14,15] For mentoring relationships to flourish, it is imperative that mentees and mentors establish trust, gain mutual respect, agree expectations, and hold similar values.[16,17] Individual positive attributes also contribute to the formation of trust. Those who are professional in their approach, possess an open communication style, are effective listeners, and hold a friendly manner, are more likely to build and sustain lasting relationships.[18] Moreover, longer informal mentoring relationships appeared to be associated with friendship and role modelling, which is inherently conceivable, as once an attachment is established, relationships are probable to persevere.[19] However, relationships may fail where there are personality differences within the partnership, competitiveness from either individual (perceived or real), conflicts of interest in the relationship, which may be exacerbated by poor communication, a lack of commitment from either party, or limited experience on the mentor's part.[16]

The quality of mentoring experience is largely influenced by the individuals involved. A mentor who is obliging, who possesses strong learning goals, and has prior experience in mentoring is more likely to provide a positive experience.[98] Prior experience appears to be associated with attitude, as mentors who lack mentoring experience tend to focus on drawbacks of the relationship, believing that they take more time than they are worth.[20] Thus, it is key for organisations who provide mentoring programmes to consider not only the design fundamentals but also ensure that those who participate exhibit and/or have opportunities to develop appropriate characteristics and mentoring experiences.

There is an abundance of literature surrounding human needs of mentors and mentees involved in a mentoring relationship in the fields of medicine and nursing,[21-26] a stark contrast to pharmacy where a mentoring culture is yet to be embedded within the profession. The authors have previously interrogated the literature and presented a framework with considerations for the evolving roles each person plays in a mentoring relationship, both independently but also as a pair.[27] This paper builds on that work and presents findings of a study that explored perceptions of pharmacists with lived experiences in a national mentoring programme in the United Kingdom (UK).

The Royal Pharmaceutical Society mentoring programme

Since its inception as the professional body for pharmacy in the UK, the Royal Pharmaceutical Society (RPS) has strived to instil a mentoring culture across the pharmacy profession through the provision of high-quality mentoring for its members. The original mentoring scheme, launched in 2010, was an adaptation of the Pharmentor National Health Service (NHS) scheme developed by the UK Clinical Pharmacy Association and the Guild of Healthcare pharmacists, and enabled mentees to search for suitable mentors who had uploaded their details to a website database.[28,29] In 2014, a dedicated programme was launched for community and primary care pharmacists to seek mentoring from a network of trained mentors within the same areas of practice. As the demand for pharmacy mentors grew, it became apparent that an improved and more sophisticated programme was needed to ensure pharmacy professionals across all career stages and sectors of practice could access mentoring from within the profession. In 2019, RPS relaunched their programme, adopting more formal processes for mentors and mentees (Figure 1).[30,31] The prime objective was to support the professional and personal advancement of pharmacists, with a focus on career development. Phase One constituted the design, creation, and implementation of a mentoring platform for students, pre-registration trainees, pharmacists, and retired pharmacists (mentees) to seek mentorship from peers and colleagues (mentors). Future phases will focus on delivery of training for mentors, expert mentoring for credentialing programmes, and a longer-term programme evaluation.

Mentors and mentees are presented with several supportive resources throughout the mentoring process to ensure they are adequately prepared for each stage of mentoring. Individuals have access to written and video guides on how to get started with mentoring, maintaining momentum, and closing the relationship, which are located within the mentoring platform (Supplementary Table 1). [32] The "Getting Started" resources explain the process of mentoring and provides information on how to build a collaborative and trusting relationship. Resources that focus on maintaining momentum discuss how

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mentees and mentors can ensure conversations remain focussed, that progress towards agreed objectives are made, and how to overcome challenging situations that may occur during mentoring. Closing the relationship is the final step in the mentoring process; therefore advice is given on how to conduct this respectfully and encourages individuals to reflect on their recent mentoring experiences. Additional resources including case studies of mentor and mentee experiences, blogs from experienced mentors providing personal advice, frequently asked questions on the technical aspects of the platform, and templates such as mentoring goal setting tools (Box 1) are also available from the RPS mentoring website.[32]

The RPS mentoring programme was launched in 2019, and as of this manuscript's writing in spring of 2021, had approximately 1500 registered users.

Aim

The study presented in this paper is part of a larger project with the aim of exploring mentors' and mentees' attitudes and perceptions on mentoring and their experiences with the new RPS mentoring programme. In particular, this study focusses on the fundamentals of the unfolding relationships in the dyadic exchange and the impact of the programme on professional development and professional advancement of the participants.

Methods

Methodological approach

This study adopted a phenomenological approach, [33] allowing the researchers to build a picture of the perceived reality from the participants' point of view, and a constructivist research paradigm.[34] A qualitative design was used to focus on how participants interpreted the world and their experiences. The researchers aimed to capture richness and nuances to these experiences, thus setting aside their pre-understanding of the phenomenon and acting non-judgementally so as to acquire true feelings and meanings behind the participants' experiences. This was accomplished through the use of semi-structured interviews, with allowance for interviewee autonomy to gain richness in the data by disarming interviewees to the extent possible. Study documentation included an invitation email to pharmacy professionals registered in the mentoring programme and having an active mentoring relationship, an information sheet, a consent form, and a semi-structured interview topic guide. Ethical approval for the study was provided by Cardiff School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences Research and Ethics Committee in November 2019.

Sample and sample size

The sampling frame included all pharmacy professionals registered in the RPS's mentoring programme. Inclusion criteria were that mentors and mentees needed to have an active relationship as identified by the system, and to have had at least 4 weeks experience and 2 meetings with their paired professional, to give them enough insight so that they would be able to reflect on their experiences. Potential participants were then identified using a mixture of purposive non-probability sampling, whereby eligible participants had to meet these inclusion criteria, followed by convenience sampling, whereby population members were available to participate in the study.

The concept of information power was used, as suggested by Malterud et al.,[35] to help determine the sample size, considering the aim of the study, the specificity of the sample, the use of theory, the quality of the dialogue, and the type of analysis chosen. This project aimed to examine the views of pharmacy mentors and mentees on mentoring and the early stages of a national mentoring programme in the UK, hence the objectives were very specific: the analysis was looking for an in-depth view from the participants' perspective. By using the concept of information power, the researchers estimated that a sample size of approximately 8-10 participants would be needed from each sample population. Data saturation was also considered in the context of sample size and analysis of transcripts.[36] The researchers had a reflexive approach towards sample size; that is, if the emerging themes were deemed insufficiently explored due to the variety and/or complexity of participants' accounts, and within the time-constraints of the project, further interviews would be conducted, until it would be judged that sufficient saturation or information power had been reached.

Recruitment

A member of staff of the RPS, who worked in the team managing the mentoring programme, agreed to act as a gatekeeper and disseminate the recruitment materials. Potential participants were identified and contacted by the gatekeeper. The recruitment email provided background information about the project, and the information sheet and consent form were supplied. All participants were instructed to either contact the gatekeeper to pass along their contact details to the researcher, or to contact the researcher directly. The invitation email was sent this in stages to maximise recruitment, once per month between November 2019 – June 2020. One follow-up email was sent 2 months after the initial invitation. The advertisement was also placed on the RPS's mentoring website and was available throughout the data collection period.

The gatekeeper was used only as a means of forwarding information to the potential participants: a list of all the pharmacy professionals who have been matched with a mentor/mentee was available to the RPS, and all members of RPS had agreed when joining that they could be contacted for feedback on the RPS's services. The gatekeeper did not decide whether participation would occur. The researchers had no access to identifying information prior to a potential participant getting in touch with them or the gatekeeper.

Data collection

A combination of literature review and stakeholder input informed the development of the data collection tool, namely the semi-structured interview topic guides. The guide focussed on motivation for becoming and/or seeking a mentor, prior experiences with mentoring, perceived challenges faced by pharmacy professionals, different ways to enable further support and the perceived role of RPS. The topic guide was piloted and subsequently amended and revised in response to emergent findings during the research. Questions explored the participants' experiences and relationships with mentoring before and with the RPS programme, need for and usefulness of support materials and resources, and perceived challenges with engaging with the scheme. Semi-structured interviews were conducted between November 2019 and June 2020. Consent was obtained before all interviews. Interviews were conducted over the phone, to account for geographical limitations.

Data analysis

All interviews were audio recorded using a Dictaphone, with consent, and each recording was transcribed verbatim by one independent researcher (HC or JC), checked for accuracy by the lead researcher (EM) and anonymised. Transcribed data were examined using inductive analysis initially, followed by deductive analysis based on the results of the inductive coding. Data was coded manually, and codes were assigned independently by two researchers. Any differences in coding were discussed and resolved. Codes with synonymous meanings were resolved into a single code, and finally grouped into themes.

Researcher characteristics and techniques to enhance trustworthiness

The researcher collecting data was a pharmacist (EM) who had previously mentored other pharmacy professionals. Even though this had been outside of the RPS national mentoring scheme, they may have held predetermined views of what the participants' views on mentoring could be. One of the researchers coding the data was an employee of the RPS (HC). To meet the criteria for trustworthiness as described by Lincoln & Guba,[37] and in an effort to increase rigour, transparency and replicability, a number of measures were followed. EM was not involved in the coding of the data; HC was not involved in data collection and the coding was repeated independently by a second researcher (JC); and the structure of the report was based on the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (Supplementary Table 2).[38]

Results

A total of 20 one-to-one interviews were conducted, each lasting between 20-55 minutes. Characteristics of interview participants are provided in Table 1.

A total of four themes were generated during data analysis; due to the overwhelming amount of data and clear break in the overarching themes, in this paper, only the two themes relating to principles of engaging in mentoring and developing a connection, and perceived contribution of mentoring towards self-growth and supporting career progression are discussed (Figure 2).

1. Principles of mentoring and developing a connection

Mentors and mentees described their perceived role in their respective mentoring partnerships and gave their own account of the definition of mentoring. Mentors' beliefs on their perceived role in the relationship largely guided their approach to the structure of the interactions. Both types of participants also discussed the crucial role of trust and understanding in developing a successful mentoring relationship.

1.1 Perceived role of individuals in a mentoring partnership

Mentors perceived that they play an important role in inspiring mentees and shaping their future attitudes and behaviours. They described a facilitation approach where they assisted their mentee in making decisions and helping them focus, through a process of listening, questioning and discussion. They felt it was not their role as mentors to 'tell' those who they were supporting, but to reassure and encourage, helping others to explore options and subsequently to take the most appropriate action. This helped to build and instil confidence in mentees, empowering them to find solutions to problems and issues.

> *"…having had [myself] some really inspirational characters [as mentors], I think it [mentoring] just goes a very long way. It really shapes who you are."*(P3)

> *"To my mind, mentorship, strictly speaking, is not telling somebody what they should do, it's talking about what they perhaps what they could do, or giving them options or, you know, helping them work out options and things like that. So, I would tend to try to be more of a facilitator."* (P13)

The mentee participants also acknowledged their own role in the mentoring relationship, understanding that they should drive the relationship so that mentors could support appropriately. They valued having their thoughts and beliefs challenged by mentors and being exposed to perspectives that they would not have thought of by themselves.

> *"So, from the perspective of me as being a mentee, I suppose it was me taking the lead in terms of what I needed from my mentor, to help me."*(P6)

Participants acknowledged that mentoring is different to coaching and management, and that confusion exists between the two concepts. It was generally accepted that coaching is more structured in its approach and associated with the development of leadership qualities and skills. It was highlighted that coaching is often provided by organisations as established programmes. However, some participants felt that there were similarities, stating that the principles of coaching and management may be helpful in mentoring situations.

> *"I think sometimes when we, we talk about mentoring and we talk about coaching, um the, the two are quite interchangeable. Umm but I think mentoring's always implies the hierarchy? And whereas coaching is a little bit more, and you shouldn't, you always, you do the mentor mentee."*(P18)

> *"…coaching is very different, and coaching is not mentoring. Mentoring is, is about providing a support by, you know, showing people that you've, you've managed to do this but 'how' did you do this, you know how did you get that placement, what did you do."* (P3)

Mentors in general felt they had knowledge and experience worthy of sharing with others, and providing advice was a key component of their mentoring relationships. They gave examples of how they acted as roles models and inspired their mentees to undertake learning in their field that they wouldn't otherwise have attempted. However, perceptions of the level of expertise required to mentor others were not shared. Some mentors felt confident to be part of a mentoring relationship even without having expertise in the subject area the mentee was looking for, provided they could access

support to help them as a mentor, or be able to signpost their mentee to networks or organisations for appropriate help. However, others felt uncomfortable mentoring a colleague without the required expertise highlighting that additional training to discuss case studies would be helpful.

> *"So I'm introducing her [mentee] to other training opportunities where she'll meet other people so that she could start [to] build up her network."*(P14)

> *"I also spoke to him [mentee] about things like the fellowship stuff out there, and again it was something you know, you're not totally aware of. You know, that sort of signposting, you know what is available, I think was really helpful."*(P2)

This was supported by mentees, who highlighted that they were seeking mentors with specific experience and knowledge that they could learn from. An example was provided by a mentee who wanted a mentor working in hospital pharmacy with experience in paediatrics, therefore their search focussed on this specialist topic and other mentors were ruled out, and as a result the participant is very pleased with the mentoring partnership and felt that they have gained useful insights on training course and helpful tips on how to prepare for a role in this area. This shared interest appeared to strengthen the relationship as mentees felt that their mentors understood their needs and therefore provided the 'right' advice.

> *"They [mentors] have a lot of experience, like a lot of stories to tell you like, 'Oh, I have this friend that who tend to do…' like a lot of experience sharing. It's quite good."*(P16)

> *"I've still got so much to learn and I think there's so much you can learn from other pharmacists or pharmacy professionals in the field and I mean there's some incredible pharmacists I can think of that I would love to support me."*(P5)

1.2 Approach to mentoring structure

Individuals described different approaches to mentoring, which appeared to be associated with prior experience and personal preferences. An unintentional unbalanced power dynamic was often reported, where mentors very much steered and led the relationship and subsequent mentoring conversations. Experienced mentors had their own expectations of how mentoring should be delivered, and some were left somewhat frustrated and disappointed with a lack of engagement of mentees. This was mostly caused by younger pharmacists wanting information for a new role rather than a true mentoring relationship, and not responding to meeting proposals despite agreeing to connect. There were even examples of pharmacists who did not engage at all in conversations, after being matched with suitable mentors.

Some mentors seemed to prefer a structured approach, where expectations were clarified during the initial stages of the relationship. These individuals set goals with agreed timelines and followed up on progress and actions at subsequent meetings. Participants who used such an approach felt this was effective in motivating individuals to complete necessary tasks.

> *"I feel like the action is more objective, 'let's get this done by this date'. It's really important. Because then you almost also engage the mentee into thinking, yes there is something I am gaining out of this rather than just having you chat about something."*(P3)

Other mentors applied a more flexible approach, adapting their mentoring style to the needs and preferences of their mentees but also the presenting goal, situation or mentoring need, recognising that 'one size does not fit all'. One mentor had a view that mentoring is for the benefit of mentees, thus it was not appropriate to forcefully push for actions.

> *"I'm quite easy about it [mentoring approach], really. You know, I feel it's up to them [mentees]. They sought, they sought [sic] out a mentor."*(P13)

> *"…ultimately it is about mentees and it's helpful for them. And that's why I haven't umm… sort of pushed the next conversation. I think it needs to be at a point in time when they feel they'll get the benefit from it [mentoring relationship]."*(P10)

1.3 Developing a relationship of trust and understanding

Mentorship was perceived as a two-way relationship that fulfilled gaps and connected both members of the relationship emotionally. Participants who were mentors felt it was important to build strong relationships with their mentees, acknowledging that it is imperative to develop trust and a connection with the other person at the initial stages of the relationship. Trust also allowed mentors to openly challenge their mentees as appropriate to support their development.

> *"I think is mutually important is that when these people come to us and when these people approach us, that there really is a connection. And that connection is nurtured through hard work."*(P3)

Being able to build a trusting relationship was equally important for mentees. They appreciated having someone listening to them, in a dedicated session, with their wellbeing in mind. It was highlighted that it was useful to speak to a senior colleague in the profession who is independent as they could provide a different perspective to those they work with.

> *"It's useful to have that somebody that's independent to, outside of work but, but understands the context around pharmacy."*(P20)

Trust was perceived as a catalyst for a successful mentoring relationship, and mentees discussed how having a safe space encouraged them to be completely honest but also to discuss sensitive topics and issues. They valued mentors who openly sharing their failures too and wanted to understand how they could learn from such situations; a concept also recognised by mentors, who discussed how sharing challenging experiences so mentees could avoid the pitfalls they previously experienced.

"I hope that even though when he sees the bad parts of [the sector] he doesn't think that I didn't warn him you know…. I did, you see I hope I, I made my point without being too negative but I did warn him that it's not easy to make it."(P19)

2. Perceived contribution of mentoring towards self-growth and supporting career progression

The concepts of personal growth and development of peers were often discussed by the participants, along with the acknowledgment that mentoring is a relationship that ideally lasts potentially a lifetime, should the relationship be successful.

    2.1 Self-fulfilment and personal growth

Mentors discussed how being able to contribute to the development of others and give back to the profession was a really rewarding experience, with a sense of satisfaction and being appreciated coming up multiple times throughout the interviews. A cohort of potential mentors for whom it was discussed that this would be of particular importance was retired pharmacists. Participants who belong to that cohort discussed that they are an untapped source for mentoring, with time to devote and years of experience to draw from.

> *"We're all humans at the end of the day and, I think we're social beings and we want to give to people … I think it's [mentoring] just a really sort of practical and really human way of helping another person, so really rewarding from that sense."*(P1)

> *"it [RPS mentoring programme] just came along at an ideal time for me [in my career], I feel like it was fulfilling the needs I've had, as well as me being able to give back to people."*(P2)

Mentoring others appeared to prompt self-reflection and thus further learning. One such area was reflecting constantly on their limitations as a mentor to support their mentees' journey. Participants recognised that in cases they did not possess the required knowledge to support their mentees and either sought advice from their colleagues or networks or signposted their mentees to other sources of support. Being involved in mentoring reinforced their own mentoring skills and knowledge, by learning from others' experiences, and most mentors highlighted that this whole experience of working with a mentee and continuing reflection on their own skills has made them better mentors. Some mentors went further and reflected that the process of constant metacognition and shaping of the way they review their own practice, enabled them to become not only better mentors, but better professionals as a whole.

> *"I'm not trying to be selfish here, obviously I want to help people, but as a mentor, you also get a lot out of your mentees. It… it makes you reflect as well, on your own career and why you have done things, certain things throughout your career. It really makes you reflect and makes you think, oh, maybe I could do this better. And I think it makes you a better person, a better professional."*(P9)

It was thought that this personal growth would be greatly enhanced by the ability for mentors to capture feedback from their mentees, formally or informally, to further encourage individuals to reflect on their mentoring approach. Feedback would enable mentors to learn if their approach had benefitted their mentees, whether their mentee had achieved their goals, and to identify areas for improvement or development. One mentor participant acknowledged that positive feedback would boost their confidence and reassure them that their support had made a difference to their mentee.

2.2 Contribution to personal and professional development of peers

It was strongly believed by mentor participants that mentoring contributed to a change in an individual's behaviour and belief in one's ability. Mentors revealed that they had observed an increase in the confidence of their mentees during their mentoring discussions, even with a limited number of sessions. This belief was also shared by a mentee who reported that they felt their confidence in delivering in their new role had increased.

> *"I think that she's [mentee] feeling more confident in her role, her new to role…ummm…and she wasn't [sure] where, where [sic] to start and by the second conversation she had some specific careers she wanted to focus in. So I think it just, just seemed sort of a confidence in the role."*(P18)

Mentors discussed not only personal, but also professional development of their mentees. Career development was a common objective of mentoring, with most mentees seeking advice and support on career progression either within their role, or when they sought to move between different settings of practice. Some mentors had already experienced a positive impact on their mentees' career development, after supporting them to prepare effective CVs and practise job interviews, improving their mentee's skills and knowledge in this area.

> *"…gave her [mentee] a few questions to answer and talked her through some of the stuff that she might come across in the interview and then she got offered, I think she got offered two jobs at the end."*(P1)

Mentors not only responded to queries in their relationships but were being proactive in providing careers advice and encouraging mentees to explore career opportunities. Mentees admitted that often they were not even aware of the different possibilities for progression, and they really appreciated their mentors' input.

> *"I wouldn't say I was in a rut, but I was certainly was umm…quite relaxed about career progression and personal development. And having that… having to discuss with my mentor, where I was, where I wanted to be, and what I felt like my need were, really got me to rethink about that. And really fired my imagination about what I wanted to do. And…and just having that I think was really positive."*(P7)

2.3 Acceptance of mentoring as a long-term process for materialising benefits

Mentors felt that time was an important consideration when determining the impact and outputs of mentoring, and they discussed a shared understanding that mentoring is a long-term process in order to materialise benefits. More experienced mentors gave examples of previous mentoring relationships, and how they continue to engage with mentees years after the initial discussions, experiencing their development as time progresses.

> *"I'm actually still mentoring her [previous mentee from outside the RPS programme]. Been mentoring her for a very long time because she's been through so many different organisational changes. And she still finds the mentoring useful, so I've continued to mentor her."*(P11)

> *" He [previous mentor from outside the RPS programme] provided me with my early guidance in my career around, you know, where I saw myself developing next. But even after he stopped, you know, being my former mentor, I still used to go to him outside the department for seven years and that whole time I used to got to [him] for things."*(P2)

Some mentors felt that the impact of mentoring have not yet been realised as part of the RPS scheme, as their current mentoring relationships were in the embryonic stages and it was too early to confirm any outputs, positive or negative. In these cases, individuals had only participated in one or two mentoring sessions and mentees had not had the opportunity to undertake agreed actions from mentoring discussions.

Discussion

This study examined the lived experiences of pharmacy professionals who participated in a national mentoring programme. Mentors and mentees discussed their reflections on the unfolding relationships in the dyadic exchange and the perceived impact of the programme on their personal and professional development and advancement, as well as those of their peers.

The findings are supportive of past research on mentorship in the broader sense and also contributed new insights. Some mentees examined the relationship experiences under the auspices of problem-solving; that is, the mentor helped them solve a particular problem and also helped facilitate their problem-solving prowess. This facet of the relationship has not been explored as much as others in the literature, but has been present. Over two decades ago, Barnett[39] found that one of the primary benefits a positive mentor can have is facilitation of a mentee's problem-solving, which for a mentor ultimately gets at higher functioning due to the stage in one's career and in other social roles. It was suggested that experts solve problems in a manner differently than novices do, calling upon their experience through reflection, and that the idea of employing reflection in practice can be effectively passed on to mentees. [39] While improvement in problem-solving through mentoring has been examined more frequently between teachers and students, there is precedence for its consideration in professional development. Formal mentoring was shown to enhance potential leadership capacity primarily through addressing previously ill-advised or ineffective problem-solving skills.[40] It has been added that mutual growth in problem-solving skills likewise breeds cohesion and camaraderie among

mentor-mentee dyads[41] and that mutual gains in problem-solving can raise the effectiveness of entire organisations.[42]

Mentees from the current study clearly described their experiences as receiving mentoring as opposed to coaching, a phenomenon in which they remarked upon quite favourably. Coaching is seen as an advanced form of consultation and guidance, whereas mentoring takes a more intimate and vested interest in the mentee. Bradford et al.[43] found that while coaching and mentoring are both useful, mentoring is more effective for knowledge transfer. The observations of participants in the current study also remarked at how mentors took a genuine interest in them as persons, which is synonymous with whole-life mentoring.[44]

Mentees in the RPS programme were equivocal about their mentors' level of expertise and their self-efficacy in mentoring, believing that some lacked the confidence to perform mentoring at its highest level. This could be due to a lack of established formal mentoring relationships embraced by the profession, as a whole, which leads to a lack of experience in mentoring. Pharmacists might not have the networking experience that it takes to truly fulfil mentorship roles, since mentors are not only there to solve problems directly but also connect mentees with others who can provide assistance.[45] This is an important consideration in future evolutions within the RPS programme and for other mentoring programmes, as mentor self-efficacy in mentorship promotes self-efficacy across a broad range of competencies for mentees.[46] Research has shown that self-efficacy can be instilled even among senior members of an organisation, and that the most effective mentoring programs are those in which mentors have been trained appropriately.[47]

The issue of power imbalances between mentor and mentee was brought up by both parties, with some mentees perceiving it, and mentors perhaps reticent to more fully engage in light of any threat that they could be wielding power, even in spite of those persons not belonging to the same employing organisation. Ghosh et al.[48] maintain that organisations consider career stage and power-distance in not only training but also in forming mentoring dyads and groups. They also implore mentoring programme designers solicit information about how identities (cultural, professional, social) might have shaped mentoring schemas that might exacerbate power imbalances in the mentoring relationship. The issue of power imbalances has arisen frequently in organisational effectiveness literature, with evidence to suggest that those imbalances not only create discord and disunity, but also communicate tacit approval by organisational leaders of unfair treatment.[49] It is suggested that training of mentors move beyond cultural competency and delve into humility and safety. Issues of race and ethnicity did not arise in the interviews of the current study specifically, as the persons taking part in the interviews were from a relatively small, homogenous group; however, as the mentoring programme grows and strives for continued improvement, it is among the considerations that must be taken into account. The concept of professional identity arose, even if not in those precise words. Mentors described how the programme helped them reconnect with the profession, while mentees were very welcome to a listening ear regarding their desire for belonging. Professional identity has been observed to be among the more important phenomena in the effectiveness of professionals.[50] Weinberg[51] argued for professional identity reinforcement in mentoring and group learning,

specifically stating that mentoring relationships characterised by mutuality produce a path that better suits the learning needs of those mentees whose professional identities are better defined.

These issues of self-efficacy and power imbalance have been examined in previous literature, with Loosveld et al. categorising mentors' beliefs about themselves and associated intricacies of the relationship into 4 mentoring positions, namely: facilitator, coach, monitor and exemplar.[52] In this study mentors identified as one or more of these mentoring positions, usually in a responsive and complementary approach towards their mentees. Structured support to mentors to reflect on their adopted model, within the context of each mentoring relationship, should be integrated in the RPS programme as key to mentors' professional development, with implications for their mentees' development.

Mentors in the RPS programme commented on the rewarding experience associated with participation. This is commensurate with previous evidence of mentor participation in well-organised programmes. In fact, mentors have expressed fulfilment through mentoring when they had otherwise become burned out or suffered from depersonalisation and a lack of freshness in the intellectual arena.[53] Another study found that mentoring relationships provide a unique context for mentors to discuss and normalise their concerns, to share ideas for managing anxieties, and to find more meaning in their work.[54] Gosh and Reio in their meta-analysis provided further evidence of the benefits of mentoring to the mentor, advancing the notion that mentoring is a collaborative rather than uni-dimensional relationship. [55]

Mentors and mentees expressed favour for the presence of a systematic (formal) programme that still allowed for informal programming to take place.[54] In the RPS programme, mentees drive the mentoring process, selecting their preferred mentor according to their needs and goals. Kashiwagi's[56] systematic review of mentoring programmes presented several mentoring models. The RPS programme attempts to traverse or mix several of these, with flexibility at its core. Indeed, mentors and mentees commented favourably upon both the flexibility of their mentorship partner and in the programme, itself. Structures that facilitate autonomous mentoring practice, such as autonomy support for mentors, autonomy orientation for mentees and an autonomy-supportive team climate, have positive effects on the personal learning for mentees.[57] Hence, mentors and mentees are encouraged to select a mentoring approach that aligns their individual mentoring styles but also one that fits around their work and personal commitments. The initial introductory meeting between both parties is key in shaping a corporative and respectful relationship. Additionally, in the RPS programme, individuals are able to form 'relationship constellations' building developmental networks for career support.[58] They can take on multiple mentors and mentees and even serve in both capacities. As such, programme administrators and participants must be mindful of potential mentoring fatigue.

Study Limitations and Strengths

There are several limitations to the study to bear in mind. The results are not intended to be transferrable to the entire group of participants in the RPS programme, or to any other mentorship groupings in other organisations, nor the entirety of practising pharmacists, who might respond

differently even under the auspices of the same programme. Interview participants could have had a desire to provide socially desirable answers to questions, or answers they might have thought the interviewers were seeking, even while this is less likely under the auspices of open-ended questions. While researchers sought the lived experiences of participants, the responses are guided to some degree by the questions comprising the interview guide. The study employed the use of saturation and information power theories to inform the sampling and execution of the project as well as multiple coders and other measures undertaken to ensure trustworthiness in the data generated.[59]

Conclusion

This study evaluated the lived experiences of mentors and mentees in a nationwide programme for pharmacists administered by a professional organisation, specifically examining the nature of relationships comprising those experiences. Participants expressed considerable enthusiasm with their contribution, underscoring the programme's flexibility, its emphasis of mentoring versus merely advising, and its responsibility for enhancing or reconnecting with their professional identity as well as fostering more positivity and liveliness in their professional roles, even beyond into their social roles and personal growth and development. Mentors felt a sense of pride in giving back to the profession. Programme administrators should continue with and promote advanced training to mentors in their own self-efficacy; indeed, appropriate and timely training is crucial to mentors establishing awareness of their mentoring position, which among other things could curtail perceived potential power imbalances within mentor-mentee dyads and lead to a more dynamic and contextualised mentoring experience.

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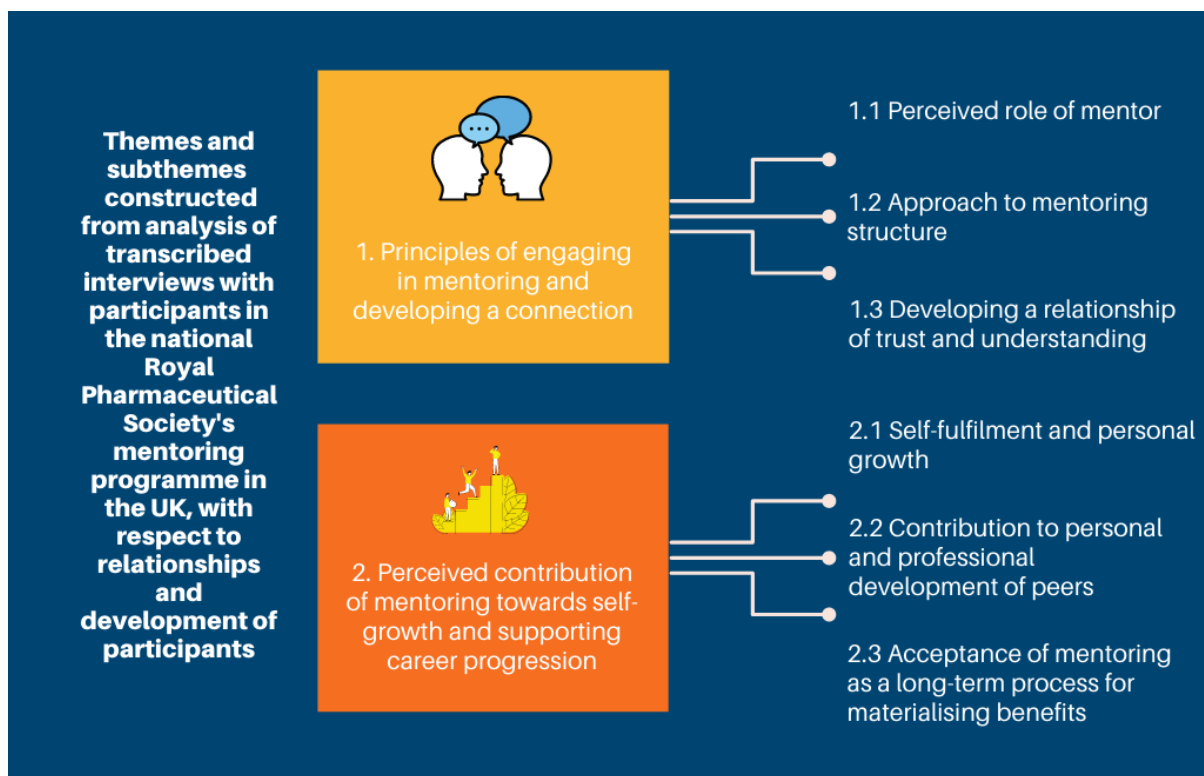
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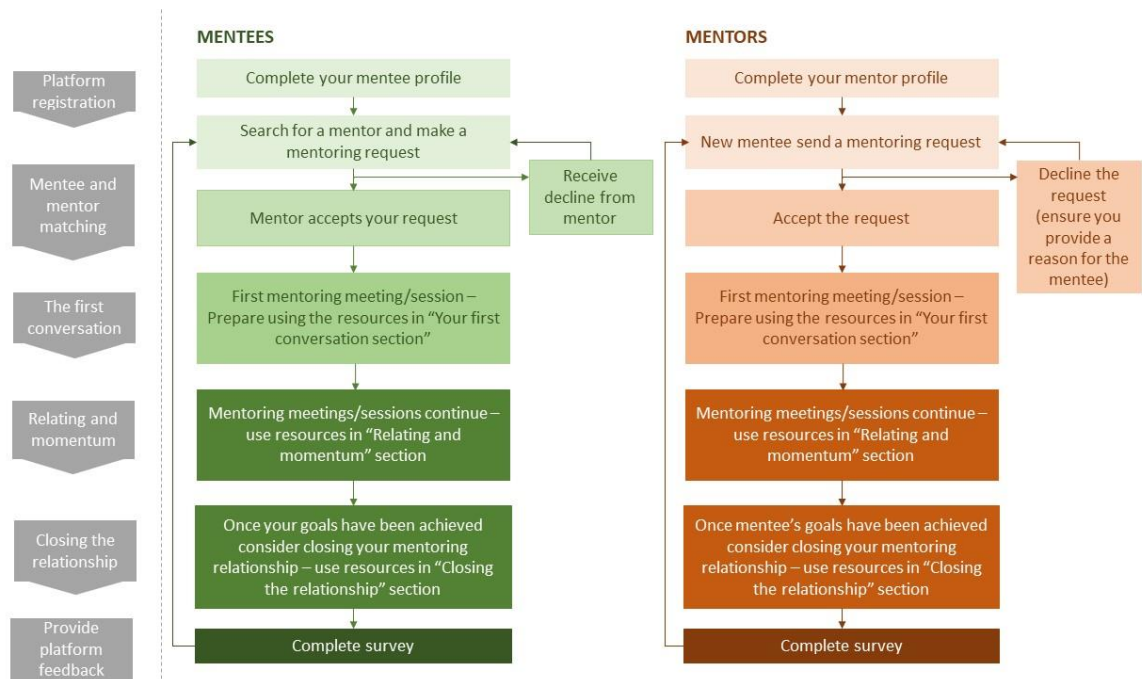
Figure 1. RPS mentoring platform processes for mentees and mentors[30,31]

Figure 2: A summary of the subthemes for the two themes with respect to mentoring relationships and personal and professional development from mentoring, as arising from thematic analysis of the data.

Box 1. Mentoring goal setting resources provided within the RPS mentoring platform

SMART action template	SWOT analysis tool	G-STAR model tool
Specific	**S**trengths	**G**oals (what are your goals)
Measurable	**W**eaknesses	**S**ituation (what situation are you facing)
Achievable	**O**pportunities	**T**hinking (what is your thinking)
Realistic	**T**hreats	**A**ctions (What actions are being considered)
Time bound		**R**esults (What results do you expect)

Table 1. Characteristics of interview participants

Participant	Sex	Current sector of practice	Mentee or mentor status	Mentoring experience
P1	M	Government body& primary care	Mentor	Extensive
P2	F	Industry	Mentor	Extensive
P3	F	Hospital & Academia	Mentor	Extensive
P4	F	Primary care	Mentor	Limited
P5	F	Academia & Community	Mentor	Extensive
P6	M	Hospital	Mentor & Mentee	Extensive
P7	M	Community	Mentor & Mentee	Limited
P8	F	Community	Mentee	Limited
P9	F	Professional body	Mentor & Mentee	Extensive
P10	F	Hospital	Mentor	Extensive
P11	F	Retired	Mentor	Extensive

P12	M	Primary care	Mentor	Extensive
P13	F	Academia	Mentor	Limited
P14	F	Retired	Mentor	Extensive
P15	F	Primary care	Mentee	Limited
P16	F	Academia	Mentee	Limited
P17	M	General practice	Mentor	Extensive
P18	F	Hospital	Mentor	Extensive
P19	F	Academia	Mentor	Limited
P20	M	Commissioning	Mentee	Limited

Appendix: Supplementary Material

Supplementary Table 1. RPS mentoring resources for mentees and mentors

Resource theme	Title of resource	Description	Format	Link
Getting the most from mentoring	What is mentoring?	An explanation of mentoring, what it is and what it isn't.	Video	https://rpharms.onpld.com/learn-more/821
	What is the role of a good mentor?	An overview of the role of mentors in supporting, encouraging, listening and sharing experiences with mentees	Video	https://rpharms.onpld.com/learn-more/822
	Why use a mentor?	A summary of how a mentor can support personal and professional development.	Video	https://rpharms.onpld.com/learn-more/823
	How it works	An outline of how to use the mentoring platform to set up a profile, how to seek a mentor and how to use the platform tools to organise meetings and communicate with each other	Video	https://rpharms.onpld.com/learn-more/824
	RPS mentoring	A summary of the RPS mentoring programme with explanations of how mentees and mentors will benefit from mentoring.	Written guide	https://rpharms.onpld.com/docs/rpharms/RPS-mentoring.pdf
	When to seek a mentor	Explains how a mentor can support professional development. Includes an explanation of differences to coaching.	Written guide	https://rpharms.onpld.com/docs/rpharms/when-to-seek-a-mentor.pdf
	Mentors: preparing for the mentoring process	An overview of how a mentor should prepare for mentoring. It advises mentors to conduct a SWOT analysis and plan for the first introductory meeting with their mentee.	Written guide	https://rpharms.onpld.com/docs/rpharms/preparing-for-the-mentoring-process.pdf
	Access support from others	A guide signposting to organisations who provide additional support, for	Written guide	https://rpharms.onpld.com/docs/rpharms/a

		example counselling services and coaching.		ccessing-support-from-others.pdf
Your first conversation	Making a mentoring relationship work	Tips on how to prepare for and approach the first mentoring conversation, including points for discussion.	Video	https://rpharms.onpld .com/mentor/journey/ 206
	Confidentiality	Information on the importance of maintaining confidentiality in a mentoring relationship, and situations where this may not apply.	Video	https://rpharms.onpld .com/mentor/journey/ 206#vids
	Clarifying roles	A reminder for mentees and mentors to clarify roles within the relationship to avoid disagreements occurring.	Video	https://rpharms.onpld .com/mentor/journey/ 206#vids
	Getting to know each other - mentors	A framework for mentors to build a trusting and respectful relationship. It recommends that mentors ask mentees questions about their professional self, future hopes, social self, personal self, educational experience, and future plans.	Written guide	https://rpharms.onpld .com/docs/rpharms/g etting-to-know-each-other-mentor.pdf
	Getting to know each other - mentees	A framework for mentees to build a trusting and respectful relationship, covering the same topics as the resource for mentors (as above).	Written guide	https://rpharms.onpld .com/docs/rpharms/g etting-to-know-each-other-mentee.pdf
	Top tips for mentors	Advice on how to be a good mentor, taking mentors through the process of identifying strengths, weaknesses and learning needs, establishing expectations, reaching agreement, learning together, and closing the relationship.	Written guide	https://rpharms.onpld .com/docs/rpharms/t op-tips-for-mentors.pdf
	Top tips for mentees	Advice for mentees on how to get the best out of their mentors, including identifying strengths, weaknesses and learning needs, establishing expectations, reaching agreement, learning together, and closing the relationship.	Written guide	https://rpharms.onpld .com/docs/rpharms/t op-tips-for-mentees.pdf
	Setting and agreeing ground rules	A template for mentees and mentors to set agree ground rules for their mentoring relationship.	Template	https://rpharms.onpld .com/docs/rpharms/s etting-and-agreeing-ground-rules.pdf
	Asking effective questions in mentoring	A guide about using effective questions to gain information, check understanding, challenging thinking, and encourage self-reflection.	Written guide	https://rpharms.onpld .com/docs/rpharms/a sking-effective-questions-in-mentoring.pdf

	Listening skills in mentoring	Guidance about using effective listening skills whilst mentoring.	Written guide	https://rpharms.onpld.com/docs/rpharms/listening-skills-in-mentoring.pdf
	GROW model	An overview of the GROW model (Goal, Reality, Options and Will), which provides a structure for mentoring sessions, helping mentees to set goals and problem solve.	Written guide	https://rpharms.onpld.com/docs/rpharms/GROW-model.pdf
	Self-assessment tool	A structured framework to help mentors identify their current mentoring knowledge and skills, and gaps and development areas	Template	https://rpharms.onpld.com/docs/rpharms/self-assessment-tool.pdf
	Managing time with patients	An example of a mentoring conversation about how to effectively manage time when caring for patients	Video	https://rpharms.onpld.com/mentor/journey/206#secondary_vids
	Preparing to be part of the RPS Faculty	An example of a mentoring conversation about how to prepare a portfolio for the RPS Faculty; a professional development recognition programme for advanced level pharmacists	Video	https://rpharms.onpld.com/mentor/journey/206#secondary_vids
Relating and momentum	Effective mentoring relationships	Information for mentors on how to build and maintain an effective relationship.	Video	https://rpharms.onpld.com/mentor/journey/207
	Maintaining momentum	Advice on how to keep meeting focussed, agree actions, and review progress.	Video	https://rpharms.onpld.com/mentor/journey/207#vids
	Mentoring techniques	Information on listening and questioning skills.	Video	https://rpharms.onpld.com/mentee/journey/204#vids
	Receiving feedback	An explanation of why feedback is important and suggestions for mentees of actions to take following feedback	Video	https://rpharms.onpld.com/mentee/journey/204#vids
Ending the relationship	Ending the relationship	Tips on how to end the mentoring relationship and a reminder to celebrate successes	Video	https://rpharms.onpld.com/mentor/journey/208

Supplementary Table 2. Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SQRS) checklist

Number	Topic	Item	Page(s)
S1	Title	Concise description of the nature and topic of the study Identifying the study as qualitative or indicating the approach (e.g., ethnography, grounded theory) or data collection methods (e.g., interview, focus group) is recommended	1

S2	Abstract	Summary of key elements of the study using the abstract format of the intended publication; typically includes background, purpose, methods, results, and conclusions	1
S3	Problem formulation	Description and significance of the problem/phenomenon studied; review of relevant theory and empirical work; problem statement	2-4
S4	Purpose or research question	Purpose of the study and specific objectives or questions	4
S5	Qualitative approach and research paradigm	Qualitative approach (e.g., ethnography, grounded theory, case study, phenomenology, narrative research) and guiding theory if appropriate; identifying the research paradigm (e.g., postpositivist, constructivist/ interpretivist) is also recommended; rationale	4-5
S6	Researcher characteristics and reflexivity	Researchers' characteristics that may influence the research, including personal attributes, qualifications/experience, relationship with participants, assumptions, and/or presuppositions; potential or actual interaction between researchers' characteristics and the research questions, approach, methods, results, and/or transferability	6
S7	Context	Setting/site and salient contextual factors; rationale	4-6, Box 1, Supplementary Table 1
S8	Sampling strategy	How and why research participants, documents, or events were selected; criteria for deciding when no further sampling was necessary (e.g., sampling saturation); rationale	5
S9	Ethical issues pertaining to human subjects	Documentation of approval by an appropriate ethics review board and participant consent, or explanation for lack thereof; other confidentiality and data security issues	4-5
S10	Data collection methods	Types of data collected; details of data collection procedures including (as appropriate) start and stop dates of data collection and analysis, iterative process, triangulation of sources/methods, and modification of procedures in response to evolving study findings; rationale	5-6
S11	Data collection instruments and technologies	Description of instruments (e.g., interview guides, questionnaires) and devices (e.g., audio recorders) used for data collection; if/how the instrument(s) changed over the course of the study	5-6
S12	Units of study	Number and relevant characteristics of participants, documents, or events included in the study; level of participation (could be reported in results)	6, Table 1
S13	Data processing	Methods for processing data prior to and during analysis, including transcription, data entry, data management and security, verification of data integrity, data coding, and anonymization/deidentification of excerpts	5-6
S14	Data analysis	Process by which inferences, themes, etc., were identified and developed, including the researchers involved in data analysis; usually references a specific paradigm or approach; rationale	5-6
S15	Techniques to enhance	Techniques to enhance trustworthiness and credibility of data analysis (e.g., member checking, audit trail, triangulation); rationale	6, Supple

			mentary Table 2
	trustworthiness		
S16	Synthesis and interpretation	Main findings (e.g., interpretations, inferences, and themes); might include development of a theory or model, or integration with prior research or theory	6-12, Figure 2
S17	Links to empirical data	Evidence (e.g., quotes, field notes, text excerpts, photographs) to substantiate analytic findings	6-12
S18	Integration with prior work, implications, transferability, and contribution(s) to the field	Short summary of main findings; explanation of how findings and conclusions connect to, support, elaborate on, or challenge conclusions of earlier scholarship; discussion of scope of application/ generalizability; identification of unique contribution(s) to scholarship in a discipline or field	12-15
S19	Limitations	Trustworthiness and limitations of findings	15, Supplementary Table 2
S20	Conflicts of interest	Potential sources of influence or perceived influence on study conduct and conclusions; how these were managed	15
S21	Funding	Sources of funding and other support; role of funders in data collection, interpretation, and reporting	15