INDUSTRIAL MENTORS

Cascading the Industrial Mentors Model for University–Industry interaction:
Benefits and barriers.

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Education and Employers   EDGE FOUNDATION   #EEConf21   www.educationandemployers.org/research

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Context

Birmingham City University (UK) has around 24,000 students from 80 countries.

The University delivers a diverse range of programmes and has a commitment to pursuing excellence that is practice led, knowledge-applied and employability-driven.

Four faculties:

- Health, Education and Life Sciences
- Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment
- Business, Law and Social Sciences
- Arts, Design and Media

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'The new tradition will encourage the harmonious, concurrent, integrated development of intellectual and occupational knowledge and skills in the context of employment. Work-based learning with an academic backbone is the critical component. The new tradition demands an ability to address the service needs of employers at the same time as safeguarding 'HE-ness' – its objectivity, rigour, creativity and imagination.'

(Wedgwood, 2008, p.20)

Wedgwood, M. (2008), *Higher education for the workforce barriers and facilitators to employer engagement*, London: Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills.

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The aim of the Industrial Mentors initiative is to maximise the potential for ongoing informal communication between students, industry-based professionals and academics.

Facilitated through online forums via the University Virtual Learning Environment
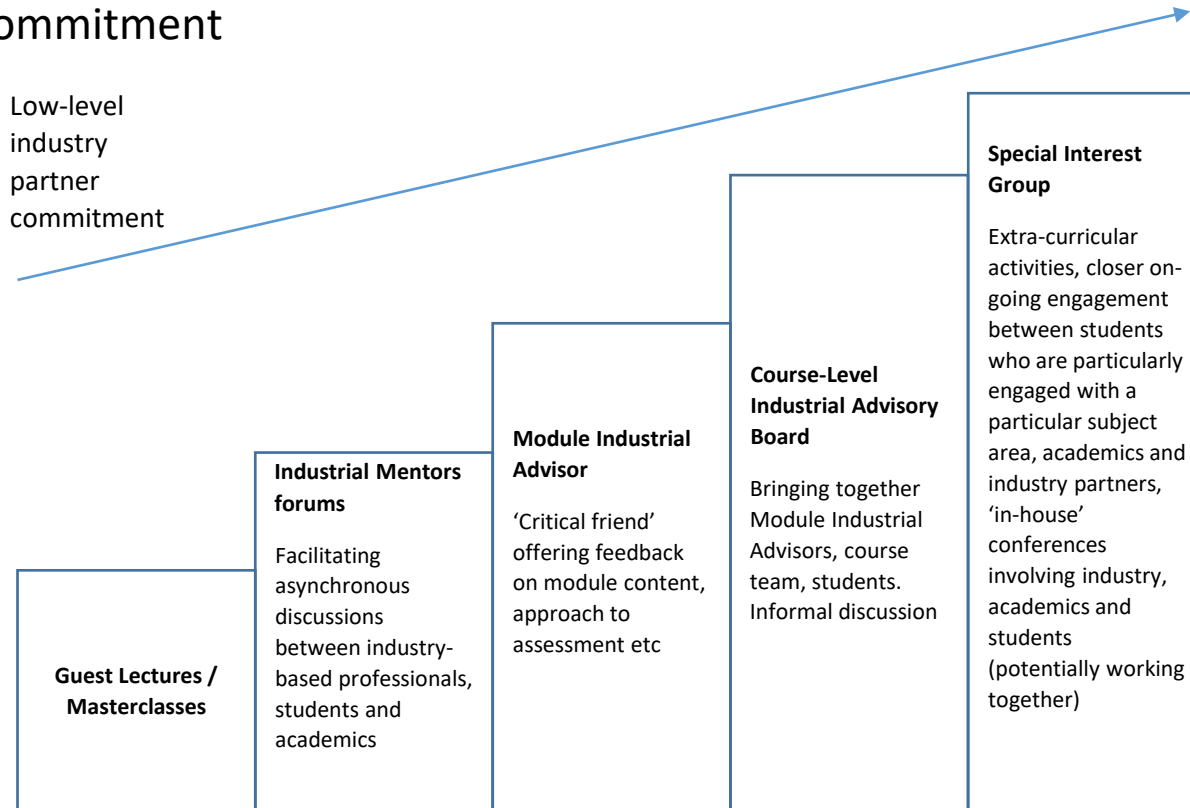
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Benefits - summary

Transfer Mechanism	Results for business	Value for business	Reward for Faculty and students	Value for individual academics
Online forums. Stand-alone Moodle (VLE) site – open to all students across all years. All modules have at least 2/3 industry based mentors. Discussion threads can be initiated by the module coordinator, the industry professional or the students. The discussions complement rather than replace the main teaching material. It is not intended that IMs forums Are 'mission critical' to delivery.	Recruitment (placement students / graduates) Opportunities for individuals from different companies to interact. Insights into hard-to-access diverse demographic, both as potential recruits and as customers (students). Chance to advance additional ideas they may not be able to resource internally.	Competitive advantage Contributes to awareness of technological trends Competitive advantage in both talent and customer markets. Better future innovation? Growth? New products? IP?	Keeping up with technology-driven change. Curriculum development. Live projects. Industry-mentored final year projects. Higher level research.	Opportunities to build platform for research, consultancy, relevant teaching, intrinsic interest. Keeping teaching fresh and interesting. Informality allows interactions with industry with minimum additional workload on the academic.

Industrial Mentors as part of a wider Industry Engagement Ecosystem - Course-level example (2020-21)

Higher industry partner input

Levels of commitment

Low-level industry partner commitment

Guest Lectures / Masterclasses

Industrial Mentors forums

Facilitating asynchronous discussions between industry-based professionals, students and academics

Module Industrial Advisor

'Critical friend' offering feedback on module content, approach to assessment etc

Course-Level Industrial Advisory Board

Bringing together Module Industrial Advisors, course team, students. Informal discussion

Special Interest Group

Extra-curricular activities, closer on-going engagement between students who are particularly engaged with a particular subject area, academics and industry partners, 'in-house' conferences involving industry, academics and students (potentially working together)

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Examples of discussions:

- Development of particular skills
- Technical questions
- Students are able to draw parallels between what they are being taught on the course and how this is mirrored in the commercial world
- Students looking to undertake a placement year have used the forum to get advice ahead of an interview
- Discussions can lead to work experience opportunities / site visits
- Assessment-orientated research including final year projects

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Impact:

- Original forum (BS Music Technology / BSc Sound Engineering & Production) has 50 Industrial Mentors (50% alumni), 11,250 views / 1400 posts over 5 years.

- BSc Visual Effects forum - Students engaging with 10 industry professionals from Canada, India, New Zealand and UK. Over 1400 views / 600 posts in 12 months.

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Strategy – introduction / wider adoption

- (2014) Initial focus on a pair of closely-related courses; BSc Music Technology and BSc Sound Engineering and Production

- Steady organic development from initial single mentor. Building on existing industry network established through student placements / guest lectures

- Recognised by the University, support given to cascade this model more widely.

- Guide created to allow for the fast-track development of new forums born out of the lessons learned on the pilot project.

- Annual internal learning and teaching festivals were used to demonstrate potential.

- Funds to allow for the payment of 'Industrial Mentors Champions' (pro-active students who were keen to establish such forums on their courses).

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Wider adoption:

At Birmingham City University Industrial Mentors forums are in development across a diverse range of programmes including:
- BA Law
- BA English
- BSc Computer Science-oriented programmes
- BSc Digital Film Production
- BA Music Industries
- BEng Broadcast Engineering
- MA Luxury Jewellery Management
- MSc User Experience Design

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Barriers:

- Time commitment required vs more pressing priorities
- Management of IMs forums not currently recognised in work allocation model / KPI
- Technical issues
- Lack of wider staff buy-in across course teams
- Platform
- Cultural differences

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Interested in exploring the Industrial Mentors model?

Contact: roy.priest@bcu.ac.uk

You are invited to join my LinkedIn Group -

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(Forum for enhancing University-Employer Links)

Thank you