At the intersection of safety and belonging: a reverse mentoring exploration of student and police higher education liaison officer (PHELO) relationships

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ABSTRACT

Through analysis of reflections from a reverse mentoring study which saw five international students mentoring a police higher education liaison officer (PHELO) in a University in England, this piece explores the role of PHELOs in the sense of belonging agenda across the higher education (HE) sector. It acknowledges that, to date, research on interactions between PHELOs and students is scarce in the UK context and seeks to begin to plug this knowledge gap to encourage more universities and PHELOs to prioritise developing positive and collaborative student relationships. The discussion explores findings from the reverse mentoring project around motivations for getting involved in community initiatives with and as PHELOs, how participants developed through the experience and how it began to change their perspectives on and realise the potential of authority-based relationships (for mentors) and relationships with students from diverse backgrounds (for mentees). As well as spotlighting the role of PHELOs, a further unique contribution of this piece is its longitudinal insight into the impact of reverse mentoring via analysis of a follow-up interview with the PHELO mentee one year later. This work advocates for an increased focus on engaging PHELOs (and related staff such as security teams) in belonging work, given a growing number of issues relating to student safety across the sector. It makes a number of proposals for how reverse mentoring could be further utilised across campus communities to pursue enhanced belonging and safety for all, prioritising lived experiences of students from under-represented backgrounds. This small-scale study seeks to be a catalyst for future, larger-scale, cross-institutional research on this important but underexplored topic which expands belonging discussions into "third space" campus relationships.

Introduction and rationale[1]

It would be an understatement to describe the higher education (HE) sector as experiencing turbulent times. In recent years, the sector has witnessed increased staff and student activism through formal industrial action (ONS, 2023; Lewis, 2024) and informal protests on issues such as rent levels (Britton and Davies, 2023), climate

[1] At the time of publication of this piece, recent and on-going student protests and encampments across the country have given rise to a number of conflicts between students and police and security teams on university campuses. Although this project was undertaken and this piece written prior to these recent issues, I would like to acknowledge these conflicts and hope that universities and students can unite together to come to a co-constructed solution that supports everyone to feel safe, respected and heard on campus.

issues (Gray, 2023) and police and security enforcement of COVID19 lockdown guidelines (Hall, 2021; Joseph-Salisbury, et al, 2023). Consequently, this is an important moment to explore relationships between students and campus police and security teams as such action is only likely to continue over time. These roles and relationships are under-researched in the UK although recent work has shone a spotlight on them (Roberts, 2022; Joseph-Salisbury, et al, 2023). It is clear particularly from the latter study that a huge amount of work is needed to begin to build and/or repair relationships between students and campus police and security teams.

Recent tragic events including the murder of two students in Nottingham, George Floyd and Sarah Everard, student suicides (Clarke, Mikulenaite & de Puryand, 2021), spates of drink and needle spiking (Department for Education, 2022) and increasing hate crime incidences generally and specifically for students (Gies, et al, 2023), amongst many others, have increased concerns about student safety. Alongside these tragic and deeply concerning incidents, there is increasing pressure being levied on universities to owe a formal duty of care to students as mental wellbeing has significantly declined in recent years (Universities UK, 2023). Campus police and security teams often play a key role in these issues.

Against this backdrop, a growing body of literature unpicks student sense of belonging, seeking to support students from all backgrounds to feel they have a place at university (Humphrey & Lowe, 2017; Bettencourt, 2021; Young Ahn & Davis, 2020; 2023). However, concerns surrounding student safety and belonging rarely intersect, despite students from minoritised backgrounds being both less likely to feel a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012; Cureton & Gravestock, 2019; Young Ahn, 2020) and more likely to be victims of crime and feel unsafe (Cabinet Office, 2018; Gov.UK, 2021; Roberts, 2022). Consequently, it is time that campus police and security embrace their roles as vital players in belonging agendas, alongside safety agendas, amidst recognition of the growing need for “third space” members of campus communities (Whitchurch, 2013; Whitchurch, 2022) to engage in activities that contribute to students’ sense of belonging (Watchman-Smith, 2024).

With much of the existing limited literature on campus safety focusing on student interactions with, and perceptions of, campus security and police more generally, this piece focuses specifically on the unique role of police higher education liaison officers (PHELOs). It does not seek to debate whether police should have a presence on HE campuses but instead accepts that this is currently the case and therefore focuses on how existing and future student/PHELO relationships could be improved. It explores the potential benefits of students and PHELOs engaging in conversations about safety together through reverse mentoring (involving students mentoring PHELOs). So far as I am aware, this is the first reported study where reverse mentoring has been used to explore student safety in this way. If students do not feel part of university policies around safety, security and campus policing, we cannot expect them to be motivated to engage with campus security and police teams, evidenced in other work highlighting negative student feelings towards antidemocratic structures within universities on these subjects (Joseph-Salisbury, et al, 2023, pp.52-53).

PHELOs face a unique challenge given their "community" changes regularly as students graduate, leave university, join etc. Being part of the "third space" (Whitchurch, 2013), they are typically on the periphery of campus communities, independent but also a core part. For example, sectoral guidelines about dealing with students who commit potential criminal offences includes no specific mention of PHELOs (Pinsent Masons & Universities UK, 2016). This lack of embedding into campus communities is likely part of the reason why co-production of student safety policies is not well explored. Reverse mentoring may provide a way for students to better understand the purpose of PHELOs and connect with them in a more meaningful way.

Although this work is not a large-scale study providing a definitive answer on the impact PHELOs have on student sense of belonging, it is a first step. Building on recent significant empirical evidence about poor police/campus security and student relationships (Joseph-Salisbury, et al, 2023), this work moves towards exploring more specifically relationships between PHELOs and students from under-represented backgrounds. By uniting voices of students and PHELOs in conversations together rather than in opposition to one another, there is an opportunity to enhance campus community, acknowledging PHELOs as part of HE's wider belonging mission and meaningfully including students in the future of campus policing, security and safety.

PHELOs and student safety

PHELOs are described as:

> police officers located on the university campus [who] offer a wide range of services to students in partnership with the university and student unions. These include advice surgeries, property marking, safe storage schemes and crime prevention advice. The officers provide safety awareness advice and visible reassurance to the students. (College of Policing, 2023)

Consequently, the PHELO role is primarily designed to support students. In the UK, PHELOs are typically employed by the local police authority and based on university campuses, working alongside university security teams. Many universities have at least one PHELO. Some universities do not have any PHELOs, often due to size or funding restrictions. In recent years, student safety has become a growing focus for UK universities, with some institutions introducing PHELO teams (as opposed to individual officers) for the first time (University of Northampton, for example), safety-focussed apps like SafeZone and new reporting mechanisms for incidents of harassment, sexual misconduct and hate crimes (Office for Students, 2022).

There is a dearth of knowledge about student safety generally (Roberts, 2022) and, in particular, about student views on campus security and police in the UK (Joseph-Salisbury, et al, 2023). Given their increasing presence in some universities as noted, there is a need to better understand the role and impact of PHELOs in the context of student safety and also in the wider quest to support all students to feel a sense of belonging at university. Much existing literature about campus police stems from US and Canadian experiences, given their much more significant presence in those

countries (Allen, 2020) and tragic numbers of campus shootings (Williams et al, 2016, p.112). In the USA, there are usually specific university/college police departments, for example the University of Chicago Police Department which has c.100 officers (UCPD, 2019). Furthermore, the Clery Act 1990 requires annual reporting of campus crime data. The lack of a UK equivalent makes reliable data on campus crimes difficult to find, although attempts to rank universities based on safety statistics are made to support prospective applicants with decision making (Rogers, 2023). There have been calls for universities to collect and publicly report crime statistics (Fazackerley, 2020), suggesting a key gap in sectoral knowledge.

Studies beyond the UK have explored the more significant impact of safety concerns for students from marginalised backgrounds, including women (Turner Kelly & Torres, 2006; Jennings et al, 2007) and students of colour (Maffini & Dillard, 2022; Russell-Brown & Miller, 2022). In the UK, students with protected characteristics are less likely to believe police campus presence increases safety (Joseph-Salisbury, et al, 2023 p.10) and women students feel and are more unsafe than male students (Roberts, 2022, pp.4-5; Joseph-Salisbury, et al, 2023, p.26). USA-based studies emphasise the importance of the perception of safety (Turner Kelly & Torres, 2006, p.26). How visible police are on campus contributes to this perception (Jennings et al, 2007, p.204). Further studies suggest campus police are often underutilised because their existence is not well known (Schafer et al, 2018, p.320; Semple et al, 2021 pp.198-9). This limited visibility is also borne out in UK research, leading to a lack of understanding amongst students about the need for police on campuses (Joseph-Salisbury et al, 2023) or knowledge of how to report to them (Office for Students, 2022a, p.4). This points away from the likelihood of students and campus police building meaningful relationships which may contribute towards students' sense of belonging. However, police presence and therefore visibility on campuses intensified during COVID19 lockdowns (Joseph-Salisbury et al, 2023, pp.45-46). This has raised concerns in terms of the connotations for universities' inclusion commitments, particularly towards racially minoritised students (Joseph-Salisbury, 2021a; ibid), heightened amidst wider findings around toxic police cultures in other contexts (Casey Review, 2023). This leads to PHELOs facing legitimacy challenges as they "inherit both good and bad police–community relations and have less control over the public perception of police in their own jurisdiction." (Williams et al, 2016, pp.114). Such examples suggest the trust divide may be growing greater between students and PHELOs.

Feelings of mistrust may contribute towards students' disengagement with PHELOs, even where students are aware of their presence and role. Recent evidence suggests trust in the police is low for people aged 18-30 (Melville, et al, 2022). Government statistics suggest student levels of trust are similar to those of the general public, albeit students of colour showed lower levels of police trust (Office for National Statistics, 2021). This is unsurprising given evidence of incidents such as racial profiling by campus security and police teams (Halliday, 2020; Joseph-Salisbury, et al, 2023). This mistrust should be a priority to address because good PHELO and student relations are vital to ensuring the reporting of crimes and related incidents on campuses, focusing on the primary student support role of PHELOs noted above. Providing appropriate support for student safety issues is also a critical element of universities'

meeting their commitments to equity and inclusion, given that people from minoritised backgrounds are more likely to be victims of crime, as noted.

PHELOs and student belonging

Belonging encompasses feelings of acceptance, being valued and included and feeling supported, respected and encouraged (Goodenow, 1993). As noted above, belonging is known to vary based on students' identities. Contrary to the growing popularity of students as partners work in curricular and co-curricular design (Mercer-Mapstone et al, 2017), campus safety policies are often adopted without student consultation such that student support is implied rather than sought (Schafer et al, 2018, p.320; Joseph-Salisbury et al, 2023, pp.52-53). Furthermore, students are often treated as "responsible for solving their own problems, including ensuring their own safety" (Roberts, 2022, p7). This runs counter to the idea within belonging literature that "students want to be talked to, not about." (UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission, 2021, p.3) and also against the growing wider ethos across the sector of staff/student partnerships and student-led approaches. "A student's perceived sense of belonging stems from how valued they feel by other members of the institution, which is facilitated through their interactions with students, faculty, staff, and the institution." (Coetzee et al, 2022, p.4). However, as "third space" community members, PHELOs are often not being factored into the complex belonging equation, despite their potentially significant impact on student belonging due to their role of ensuring student safety on campus and creating perceptions of such safety.

Recent research suggests feelings of safety are linked to belonging although this relates more to psychological safety, as opposed to safety from crime or physical harm (WonkHE, 2022, pp.50-53; Ajjawi, Gravett & O'Shea, 2023). Safety in this sense has, so far as I am aware, only been considered alongside belonging in HE in relatively brief terms (Humphrey & Lowe, 2017). Students' surroundings in terms of living spaces and local area have been shown to be a key belonging domain (Young Ahn & Davis, 2020), as well as spaces on and related to campus (Wong, 2024). Feelings about surroundings and therefore belonging are impacted by perceived sense of safety and potentially by presence, or not, of PHELOs within those surroundings (Roberts, 2022 – discussing security/surveillance on campuses). Exploring the potential of PHELO and student relationships therefore adds a new perspective to this physical belonging domain.

Supporting students to build relationships with campus security and police which may contribute towards sense of safety and belonging has not been a priority to date. This may be difficult to do when, typically, PHELOs are seen at induction events but otherwise may have limited interaction with students. Consequently, research into the potential benefits of PHELOs and students engaging in conversations over a sustained period contributes to further understanding the role of PHELOs in the student belonging puzzle. Reverse mentoring offers one potential method to begin exploring collaboration between students and PHELOs to address issues of mistrust, safety and exclusion in partnership, envisioning a different, more collaborative and inclusive

approach to campus policing in the future which contributes towards wider sense of belonging related goals.

Reverse mentoring

Reverse mentoring promotes reciprocal conversations across perceived divides, supporting individuals from different backgrounds to have mutual discussions. It is noted for its cross-generational learning benefits in human resources (Browne, 2021; Chaudhuri & Ghosh, 2012; Kase et al, 2019; Murphy, 2012) and social work contexts (Breck, et al, 2018), including its capacity to reduce ageism (Leedahl et al, 2020) and increase workplace diversity (Jordan & Sorrell, 2019). However, it remains under-researched, generally and specifically in HE (Morris, 2017, p.286). Reverse mentoring positions people who typically face deficit narratives around their identity as experts (mentors), mentoring those with scope to improve their knowledge by learning from mentors' lived experiences (mentees).

Recent HE research considers the role of students' habitus in developing inclusive teaching practices through reverse mentoring (Cain, Goldring & Westall, 2022), reverse mentoring to support student self-authorship (O'Connor, 2023), reverse mentoring to address attainment gaps (Petersen & Ramsay, 2021), inclusion of employers as mentees through reverse mentoring to improve workplace readiness (Raymond et al, 2021) and how reverse mentoring may alter the discourse of senior staff working with under-represented students (Curtis et al, 2021).

Reverse mentoring can support mentees to take follow-up actions which contribute towards wider change within a community or organisation. Consequently, it is helpful for mentee(s) to have positions of power and ability to influence others i.e. mentor and mentee are of "unequal status" (Murphy, 2012, p.555). However, this is not imperative. Conversations can focus on any topic that is a priority in the relevant context and provides mentees with insight into experiences different to their own. This might be on the basis of role (e.g. senior and junior co-workers), identity characteristics (e.g. a Black lawyer mentoring a white lawyer) or other background difference (e.g. a working-class patient mentoring a middle-class doctor). Whilst there is some evidence of reverse mentoring being used internally by policing teams (Westall et al, 2022; College of Policing, 2023a), reverse mentoring involving community members and the police is rare (Elms, 2021), emphasising the uniqueness of this study.

A further missing piece of knowledge is around the impact of reverse mentoring. Most empirical studies capture participant perspectives during or immediately after reverse mentoring. Whilst helpful in understanding learning potential, such analysis omits assessment of whether reverse mentoring actually results in or contributes towards change. This is a key issue the current project seeks to begin to address through the mentee's follow-up interview, contributing to further understanding about what reverse mentoring can do, now we better understand through recent literature its significant potential. This piece therefore not only provides an evidence base for the utility of reverse mentoring as a mechanism to support the building (or rebuilding) of relationships between students and PHELOs but also provides a novel insight into the

impact of these conversations through longitudinal methodology, called for in previous work (Browne, 2021, p.257; Leedahl et al., 2020, p.13).

Methodology

This ethically approved study analysed post-project reflections collected from five students who independently mentored a PHELO, as well as the post-project reflection and a one-year post-project follow-up interview with the mentee. The university to which participants belong has one PHELO. The PHELOs interest in reverse mentoring was piqued following findings from a cross-campus safety survey which highlighted issues including: students feeling unsafe at night, lack of safe travel options, students engaging more with local police rather than the PHELO and limited understanding about campus safety services. The survey suggested safety concerns were heightened for women and international students. This echoes findings in research conducted on other campuses (Roberts, 2022). The potential richness of PHELO and student conversations sought to build on this survey data and provided the rationale for utilising reverse mentoring.

This is one of the first reported reverse mentoring schemes where one mentee has been mentored by multiple individuals (Ali Raza & Kiki Onyesoh, 2020). This sought to tackle concerns that reverse mentoring gives mentees an insight into the lived experience of one person which may not be representative (and should not be expected to be representative) of a wider community.

Data is structured using the latter two phases of Bridges (2002) three-phase transition model: ending, neutral zone and new beginnings. The “ending” represents the end of the mentee’s practice without student experience insights - the starting point for this project. The “neutral zone” represents the time immediately after mentoring where there was possibility for change but also overwhelm and confusion (utilising post-project reflections). The current time is recognised as “new beginnings” (considering the one-year post-project interview) to explore whether the mentee progressed from the neutral zone.

The mentee met individually with each mentor fortnightly on five occasions. Students received a £50 voucher for their time and contribution. Meeting themes moved from initial ice-breaking discussions into past safety and police related experiences and finally, into developing proposals to enhance student safety. It is vital that reverse mentoring has clear purpose (in this case, to enhance student/PHELO relationships and consequently, student safety). The schedule of meeting themes provided to participants sought to ensure this purpose was remembered throughout.

To recruit mentors, an e-mail announcement was sent to students in the university’s law school. Applications were particularly encouraged from students who identify as under-represented, given the differential impact of campus policing, noted above. The law school was chosen because of connections between the study of law/criminology and police/criminal justice. Three post-graduate law students (M3-M5), one undergraduate law student (M2) and one undergraduate criminology student (M1) took the mentor role. Four mentors were international (M2-M5).

Participants completed a reflective log after each meeting using a: “What? So what? Now what?” model (Rolfe, Freshwater & Jasper, 2001; Driscoll, 2007) to encourage a commitment to “continuous learning beyond their participation” (Murphy, 2012, p.565). They also completed a deeper holistic reflection at the end of the project as Bassot (2020) advocates for (p.31). This final reflection formed part of the research data, individual meeting reflections did not. This sought to enable participants to reflect freely in-between conversations without the potential pressure of contributing to research. This focus on care for participants and genuine interest in their experiences, not just project outputs, supported the building of rapport and trust which upholds research integrity (Guillemin et al, 2018).

For the longitudinal interview, the mentee received questions in advance, promoting interviewee comfort (Matthews & Ross, 2010; McGrath et al, 2019). Viewing reverse mentoring as an experiential learning opportunity (Kolb, 1984), the mentee was asked to re-consider some comments in their end-of-project reflection to assess whether they had acted on their intentions and also as a form of “member reflection” through “reflexive elaboration” on initial post-project reflections, as advocated for by Tracy (2010, p.844) for credibility. Mentors were not interviewed as the focus is on what the mentee has done to enhance student safety since the project, recognising the need to place the onus post-project on mentees to use their positions of power and privilege to catalyse broader change.

Given this is a small dataset (six reflections and one interview transcript), analysis was conducted manually to immerse myself in the data as advocated for by Braun & Clarke (2006). Analysis was reflexive because it was conducted by me. I work in HE, with students from under-represented backgrounds and research reverse mentoring. This results in many assumptions, including that reverse mentoring is a beneficial process. However, I was acutely aware of the difference in this study of police/student relationships, versus staff/student relationships in my previous work and the complex and traumatic wider history of police engagement with under-represented communities against which this study sits. This subjectivity is part of the analytical resource (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p.330; 2023, p.2), as is my positionality as a white woman academic from a working-class background (Avraamidou, 2020, p.323-324). Whilst acknowledging that “following procedure is not a guarantor for doing ‘good TA’ (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p.329), the process is summarised for sincerity (Tracy, 2010).

Mentor data was divided into meaningful “chunks” (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p.364) and combined into one document. There was no coding framework, as per Braun & Clarke’s reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (2021, p.334). Instead, all student data was explored to search for relations which became codes. Some codes were removed for example, if only one “data chunk” was present under an initially identified code. A narrative was constructed to link chunks together and develop themes. This resulted in some data being removed as either repetitive or not directly related to a theme, echoing the retreating and returning inherent in RTA (ibid, p.332). These themes created the basis to analyse the mentee’s end-of-project reflection to identify which themes were also present therein and any additional themes missed from student data analysis (a further retreat and return).

Presentationally below, “neutral zone” themes are grouped within three over-arching topics which mirror reflective log questions. The follow-up interview transcript was analysed alone to assess what, if anything, had been influenced by the reverse mentoring conversations to symbolise “new beginnings”. Where mentors are quoted, identifying codes are used (Nowell et al, 2017) (M1-M5). The mentee is referred to as either the mentee or PHELO.

Findings

This section focuses on the “neutral zone” as reflections were gathered promptly after the end of the five meetings. Participants considered what impact the project had on them in the immediate term and what thought processes it encouraged them to go through, facilitating movement towards “new beginnings”. Reflections are split into three key phases of the participants’ journeys: motivation, development and change.

Engagement motivators

As explored above, students lack trust in the police and often may not know how to report incidents to PHELOs or that their services even exist. Having knowledge about what motivates students to, despite this, engage in PHELO mentoring may support development of future co-created safety projects, improving diversity in student voices initiatives and engaging students who may be most negatively impacted by police and security presence on campuses to contribute their lived experiences to meaningful change. Key motivations for mentors centred around making things better for others and being heard in their own right. This aligned with the mentee’s goals to embed student voices in their practice to provide a better informed PHELO service. In future work seeking to engage students in safety initiatives, it may be beneficial to proactively emphasise the capacity students have to influence policy through sharing their perspectives. This may support in motivating a wider range of students and colleagues to engage and contributes to understanding how the sector might repair or initiate relationships between under-represented students and campus police and security teams.

Paying it forward

A commonality amongst mentors fuelling motivations to mentor was altruism - “*being able to make a positive change within the university*” [M1] and “*help improve the safety of our society*.” [M2] Students felt useful in providing their insights [M2] and that they could help prospective students make informed decisions about university through “*realistic description*” of lived experiences [M3]. There is nobody better placed to share experience than individuals who have lived it. Students were motivated by the view of themselves as experts helping others.

Some mentors drew on past personal experiences motivating them to help others. M4 desired to support more students to engage with issues of campus safety because they recalled how they had personally struggled to settle in at university and how the help they received was critical. Paying their experiences forward was a key motivator. Awareness raising was echoed by M3. Both M4 and M5 were motivated to help fellow

international students, understanding the uniqueness of their experiences. M5 talked about wanting to personally feel safer in the city as an international student, alongside helping peers. This sense of participating in their local community through sharing lived experience insights on safety provides evidence of a practical manifestation of the development of belonging, based on engagement with surroundings identified in previous work (Young Ahn & Davis, 2020, p.631).

Mentors bonded with their mentee over these altruistic motives as the mentee's primary driver was "*to influence improvements … to services for students in the future*." The mentee was concerned about the lack of student voices embedded into their current practice and whether their approach was "*relevant or effective to the student population*." Uniting mentors and mentee in this project supported both to work towards fulfilling these goals.

Using our voices

Mentors were motivated by the opportunity to be heard and share experiences, something that is rare at university around issues of safety, as opposed to, for example, giving module feedback. M3 felt their insight as an international student was vital. Mentors displayed significant vulnerability in experiences they shared, including racism, false accusations and violence in halls of residence. This may have been the first time these experiences were shared with a perceived authority figure at university, demonstrating the importance of having dedicated time to explore safety issues.

Opportunity to get feedback from students, particularly international students, was novel and a clear driver for the mentee, providing insights they were otherwise not privy to. The mentee was "*aware there are sometimes barriers to international students seeking or receiving assistance from the Police*" but was unsure what created those barriers. The mentee was keen "*to reach more students and to engage in a more positive manner*" through feedback on specific practices to enhance accessibility of police support.

Self-development

A primary driver of good reverse mentoring must be what mentors (here, the students) get out of the experience, alongside what mentees learn, in order to respect and value mentors' lived experience expertise. This section explores what participants gained from reverse mentoring. As with motivations, having knowledge of what student safety focused reverse mentoring can do for individuals provides understanding of how we might meaningfully engage more students in safety-focused partnerships in the future. This section demonstrates the value of students getting to know and understand PHELOs (and vice versa) to potentially (re)build trust. Transparency may increase students' willingness to seek help from PHELOs, enhancing their support network in times of need and overall sense of safety. The opportunity to break down barriers created by authority divides also, somewhat unexpectedly, broke down other barriers, particularly cultural and language barriers. Providing more embedded opportunities for students with English as a second language to engage in community conversations

around safety can provide an important lived experience insight for PHELOs and an invaluable opportunity for students to develop language confidence through building more informal relationships with third space campus members.

Enhanced awareness

Improved understanding of police processes and how to get help was evident for all mentors. M3 and M5 did not know the PHELO role existed before this project. M1 suggested they now feel more comfortable reporting a crime than they did previously. Conversations between M1 and the mentee often focused on safety for women. Mentors began to consider what it is like to be a PHELO through getting to know an individual within the police force. Prior to the project, mentors had mostly relied on the media for their views of the police which can increase perceptions of lack of safety, as explored above. Conversations began to unpack this and supported students to gain more of an insight into how PHELOs work.

Similarly, conversations gave the mentee insight into student worlds. It was beneficial for the mentee to understand "*feelings of safety and their opinions of the Police in general, and what things may impact on these things i.e. limited daylight hours in winter* [for international students] *and media reports*", as opposed to relying on stereotypes or assumptions around what students think. Understanding subtle differences between student demographics (for example, between international students from different countries, as individuals, as opposed to treating all international students homogenously) can support PHELOs to adapt more inclusive practices, rather than assuming a "traditional" student stereotype in their decision making. This may contribute towards more inclusive campus policing.

Honest conversations

Previous work has demonstrated the benefits of reverse mentoring in supporting students to feel heard by academic staff (O'Connor, 2022; Cain, Goldring & Westall, 2022). This project further evidences these benefits in the context of third space staff. M2 picked out how the mentee took lots of notes during their meetings, indicating they intended to follow up on conversations. This supported M2 to "*freely express*" themselves and recognise the value of giving feedback. M1 felt they were getting things off their chest whilst M3 felt respected because the mentee listened and gave honest feedback. Personality traits of the mentee were key. M4 described the mentee as "*very understanding, supportive and encouraging ...*" and how this had directly increased M4's sense of belonging to the university. Ensuring PHELOs are committed to learn and willing to be vulnerable and challenged is vital to supporting mentors to have a positive experience – for impactful reverse mentoring, everyone "must make a commitment to the shared goal of mutual support and learning" (Murphy, 2012, p.558). Other PHELO mentees in future work may need more training before engaging in reverse mentoring. Where such encouraging personality traits are less naturally present, reverse mentoring may do more harm than good. This can be seen in differing approaches of individual police officers/security staff in other student-focused policing and security work (Joseph-Salisbury, et al, 2023, p.22). This piece therefore suggests

that rather than shying away from PHELO/student partnerships, the university sector should strive to do more of this work, whilst acknowledging that some participants may need more support than others or may need to take important preparatory steps first (such as independent research and inclusion training), based on individual personality traits and existing practices.

This project provided opportunity to talk about topics mentors had not previously had "permission" to explore at university. It made student safety a priority, signalling to mentors that their experiences matter. M1 *"enjoyed having open and honest conversations with my mentor about difficult topics such as violence against women, racism and sexism … and drug policies*". Sexism, racism and alcohol/drugs misuse were the most common issues mentors discussed. Despite hesitation that these might be controversial topics, M3 relished the opportunity to be honest about their experiences. M2 valued the informal relationship – being more like a conversation with a friend which facilitated "*fruitful conversations*" [M4] and supported students to become more open-minded and understanding through making the PHELO role more transparent [M1].

Breaking through barriers

An increased sense of confidence was tangible within mentor reflections, manifesting in different ways including language, social capital, asking for help and leadership. Several mentors valued the conversations for developing language skills. This rare opportunity for second language speakers to have in-depth discussions in English outside their discipline study began to allay pre-existing fears about not expressing themselves clearly: "*I improved my English a lot*" [M2]. M3 echoed this conversational benefit from standing in their mentee's shoes. The challenge of language barriers was reflected on by the mentee. They overcame this "*by altering my own communication skills to speak more clearly*", recognising their role in addressing this, as opposed to focusing on a deficit view and seeing language issues as a mentor problem. This highlights that all staff, including those like PHELOs in third space roles, have a part to play in adapting their approaches to support second-language students and that sometimes the most transformative language work can happen in these more informal spaces. Yet navigating language barriers is not necessarily something campus staff outside teaching roles are given much support with. In light of increasing internationalisation across UK universities (Lomer, Mittelmeier & Courtney, 2023), this issue should be given more attention. Due to improved language confidence, M3 felt the experience made them generally more confident to participate in other projects, given their proven ability to interact with people different to them which they had previously been uncomfortable with. Conversations left M5 feeling they "*know how to communicate*". This highlights reverse mentoring as a mechanism to support students to develop language confidence in an environment where they are in the "expert" shoes, as opposed to feeling deferent to an authority figure.

M1 felt unsure whether they could contribute anything helpful to the project. This is common in reverse mentoring where mentees are typically in less experienced roles, mentoring someone perceived as more experienced. This echoes "the benign ignorance that students have about their potential role in fostering a more safe and secure campus environment …" (Williams et al, 2016, p.124). M1 began to recognise

the value of sharing lived experiences to instigate bigger conversations. M2 described themselves as "*braver to try anything new*" whilst M3 celebrated their ability to go "*beyond my comfort zone*", something that can be particularly challenging at postgraduate level when time pressures are intensive. M3's peers had questioned why they took part in this project and whether it would contribute to their career goals. This myth of reverse mentoring being of one-way benefit for mentees only must be dispelled when running such projects. Whilst mentee benefits might be obvious, mentor benefits should be clearly articulated to enhance diverse student engagement and motivation.

Discussions supported the mentee to develop "*a better understanding of student's feelings of safety and how these sometime varied based on … backgrounds*". Those not involved in pedagogic research or teaching within HE may not easily recognise the differential impact of policies and processes on different students. Reverse mentoring can illuminate these knowledge gaps and promote more informed, inclusive practices, challenging traditional ways of doing and being, particularly prevalent in law and criminal justice. The mentee found some conversations challenging when concerned about maintaining neutrality on political issues as a police officer. This suggests the ability to have truly authentic conversations may be more challenging than where academic staff are being mentored, as in previous studies. Whilst this appeared to only be a minor issue, it highlights an important consideration for future reverse mentoring/partnership work when attempting to "remove" hierarchical layers. A blanket approach cannot be applied to all campus community members and reverse mentoring must be tailored to acknowledge specific power relationships which extend beyond campus perimeters; context is key.

Change and progression

This section considers the extent to which reverse mentoring conversations contributed towards a change in views of mentors and mentee, focusing on the decreasing trust in police and influence of student/PHELO relationships on other relationships involving similar power dynamics. This contributes to understanding wider impact beyond one-to-one relationship development and self-development, evidencing the "affective-based learning" capacity of reverse mentoring (Murphy, 2012, p.557).

Building mutual trust

Changed perspectives and hope for improved police/student relations were common across mentors. New thought processes catalysed potential willingness to engage with the police: "*I definitely view the police in a different way now … time I have spent with my mentor has reassured me that the police force is changing in a positive way*." [M1]. Some of the negative perceptions mentors had before the project stemmed from peer and family stories. Reflections form this project provides evidence that direct conversations can counter hearsay evidence that instils police mistrust (Williams et al, 2016, p.120). That is not to suggest the perceptions students came to the project with were false in any way, but the conversations permitted them to consider alternate

realities and build a personalised relationship with the individual PHELO responsible for their campus safety.

The mentee took longer to build rapport with mentors who seemed "*mistrusting of the police*" but these students began to *"relax and be more open with me … as their opinion of the police began to change*". This is reflective of a common barrier in developing student/staff relationships – lack of time. It is difficult through one-off interactions to change someone's opinion, especially on something as significant as trust in the police for minoritised or under-represented students. We need to understand one another as humans and the specific pressures and influences we each face before we can understand why we do things a certain way and before we can potentially create space for new ways of thinking, healing and progressing from past injustices (or at least beginning to). Reverse mentoring carves out space and time for this trust building exercise which may otherwise undermine student engagement with campus safety initiatives.

Being mentored by international students provided opportunity to discuss their experiences with police in other countries and how this influences perceptions of UK police. Where mistrust has been embedded in students throughout their pre-university lives and potentially increased during their time at university, this likely cannot be undone through surface level acts like putting up posters or being seen on campus (which may in fact have the opposite effect – Joseph-Salisbury, et al, 2023). Knowledge about the PHELO role and student safety should be recognised as part of the hidden (co-)curriculum which can have a profound impact on academic and social university experiences. Reverse mentoring conversations provide a deep dive into this shielded knowledge. The mentee had not understood the impact of feelings of safety on student experience prior to the project but through these conversations, began to understand how the two are closely intertwined. This evidences the need for PHELOs to engage on a more personal level with students to develop their role in sense of belonging work and begin to develop or rebuild trust with their campus community.

Influence on other relationships

Mentors learnt a lot about the work that goes on "behind the scenes" to keep students safe and the responsibility attached to this [M2; M4]. This reflects findings in previous projects about the power of students seeing what it's like for staff from the "other side" (O'Connor, 2022; Cain, Goldring & Westall, 2022). New knowledge can bridge divides between students and PHELOs and, as M5 reflected, supports students to see that communications with the PHELO are "*useful and easier than I thought*". M3 appreciated the welcoming and respectful nature of the mentee which encouraged them to speak freely. M5 valued the reciprocity and encouragement to bring ideas without pressure of always having to be "right" that they often experienced elsewhere at university. M2 reflected on the relaxed environment that supported them to view the conversations as those between friends whilst M4 remembered an excitement ahead of meetings. This positivity does not assume their initial negative views or past experiences will be forgotten, but there is hope for change and an empowering sense that they can be part of that change. Furthermore, ability to build a different relationship

with someone in a position of authority may influence how students build relationships with others across campus and externally, expanding and enhancing social capital which may provide future beneficial opportunities.

Mutual respect was a vital element for the mentee too who felt their active listening contributed to supporting mentors to "*open up more and provide more effective and constructive feedba*ck". By meaningfully investing in the relationships, the mentee got more out of them. Recognition by the PHELO of the value in building more informal and personalised relationships with students may influence future practice when engaging students in safety initiatives. Existing research advocates the importance of allies in the "student safety revolution" (Turner Kelly & Torres, 2006, p.35). The nature of the relationships built points towards potential for meaningful allyship within the PHELO role, positively impacting more students not involved in the mentoring scheme. It challenges "us and them" mentalities (Williams et al, 2016, p.121) prevalent where students and police are juxtaposed (often for good reason based on past damaging interactions), rather than being viewed as belonging to one community. Reverse mentoring between PHELOs and students can therefore prompt broader changes beyond individual relationships built.

One year later: reverse mentoring in action

Having considered reflections immediately following the pilot, this section focuses on the "new beginnings" phase. This is not to suggest the mentee had come to the end of the transitional period triggered by reverse mentoring but to explore what impact, if any, reverse mentoring conversations have had on the mentee's practice so far. The mentee acknowledged how '*it's difficult to pinpoint what is due to the project and what isn't.*" Consequently, this discussion does not attempt to create a causal link between subsequent actions and reverse mentoring conversations. However, longitudinal reflection allows exploration of the capacity reverse mentoring has to instigate change and contribute, partly or wholly, to improved practices and student/PHELO relationships alongside other initiatives.

Induction, training and CPD

Looking back, the mentee valued the project as an induction resource as they were new to the PHELO role at the start of the study: "*it did help me kind of integrate into this role better than I think it would have without it because it gave me more of an insight of … the student way of thinking …*" This further emphasises the need for PHELOs to engage meaningfully with students in order to better understand the community they are working with. This echoes reflections above around the need for specific training of PHELOs, particularly where personality traits or approaches and characteristics more typical in authority roles like the police may not correlate with HE values like building sense of belonging for a diverse range of students. The PHELO role is unique and different to policing roles more generally – this should be acknowledged and embraced. For example, the mentee recalled how differences between perspectives of international students and UK born students had developed their cultural awareness when interacting with students, noting "*less obvious*

differences … that I'd never kind of acknowledged before", such as the dark nights issue highlighted above.

Benefits to repeated engagement with reverse mentoring are not explored in existing studies. There was interest from the mentee in re-engaging with reverse mentoring for a second time as part of continued professional development (CPD). However, it was felt this would be best suited for a specific safety issue that the mentee might work on in the future, as opposed to re-engaging with a scheme more generally about student safety like the present study. The mentee recognised the benefits of university security teams taking part in reverse mentoring as negative views of campus security had emerged in their mentoring conversations, echoing findings in other recent work (Joseph-Salisbury, et al, 2023). The mentee viewed this as a responsibility of security teams to consider:

> "*how* [they] *can adapt their behaviour to be more approachable and to build a better relationship with students … so they can provide a better service …… breaking down any potential barriers to calling on security for assistance ...*"

This encouragement for campus security teams to engage with student voices to inform practice represents a refreshing approach to campus safety, bringing it in line with the focus across the HE sector on embedding student voices into policy development and practice.

There was a sense that the opportunity to look back one-year later on what has happened since the pilot was also useful CPD. Embedding regular reflective practice may be particularly important for those in positions of authority who have engaged in initiatives like reverse mentoring so that they can recognise what they have achieved or where there are remaining gaps in knowledge. It may encourage them to continue working with and advocating for students, acknowledging that the "new beginnings" phase is just that – a beginning – and the process of becoming a true ally for under-represented people is a long-term, intentional and continuous commitment which is never achieved in any final sense as student cohorts continue to diversify and change. In light of these positive findings, inclusion of reverse mentoring or similar relationship building focussed initiatives in induction level and CPD police and security training within universities would benefit from further scoping and research, with mentors being supported and paid for their involvement.

Communication and awareness raising

The mentee considered how reverse mentoring highlighted students not reporting incidents to them as PHELO and how this has changed since. Whilst the mentee attributed this in part to new services introduced at their university, there was some deeper reflection in terms of what the mentee personally contributed to this change: "*I broke down those barriers and became more accessible to students and made reporting more accessible ...*" following reverse mentoring. The mentee gave credit to their mentors supporting the mentee to "*understand why students wouldn't necessarily want to report to me* … [so I could] *build that confidence in the police amongst the student population*." They also attributed this to increased regularity and relevance of

safety messaging to students - timing and content of communications had been a significant conversation topic with mentors. As well as campus-level communications, the mentee reflected on being "*more considered in how I communicate with students and how I get messaging out*" on an individual level. This recognition of their role in improved relations on campus is an important acknowledgment of how reverse mentoring with a small number of students can change approaches to engaging with students at large, having a ripple effect which may facilitate improved student safety cultures more widely.

As four mentors were international students and a specific concern about safety of international students catalysed the project, a number of subsequent actions focused on international students, including becoming more closely involved with pre-arrival and induction processes. The mentee has since run sessions with the university's student union including supporting international students to better understand hate crimes: "*I have become a lot more involved with the International student demographic and trying to reach them* …" since reverse mentoring. Awareness created through reverse mentoring conversations supported the mentee to metaphorically stand in the shoes of international students. They have since used this perspective to better inform international students about campus safety, demonstrating the domino effect of reverse mentoring learnings for the wider benefit of the student body and how this process can contribute towards better embedding third space colleagues like PHELOs into university communities and processes.

Action against discrimination

Tackling racism and other discrimination is a key area the mentee focussed on since reverse mentoring. They reflected on how mentor conversations shone a spotlight on "*microaggressions and more subtle discrimination. That definitely kind of opened my eyes … and informed … work that's gone on … trying to raise awareness and educate* ..." Reverse mentoring can be particularly beneficial where one person with influence experiences a significant moment of learning and seeks to share that learning with others for the greater good of a community. The mentee was surprised by some of the discriminatory experiences mentors had lived and the fact they were not aware what they could do about it. Whilst the mentee had reflected on this initially, as explored above, it is interesting to note how these stories stayed with them and fuelled their future practice, evidencing the power of sharing lived experiences.

The mentee reflected on how mentoring discussions fed into wider conversations about city safety. The mentee is part of a group tackling violence against females. Whilst this goes beyond campus safety, students make up a significant proportion of women in the city so their voices add an important dimension. The mentee's increased understanding about student experiences feeds into this group:

> *"my role there is to basically advocate for students and ensure that students concerns are heard … the reverse mentoring project, which has given me definitely more of an insight on the student mind … helped to influence the work that's happened across the city in terms of trying to tackle violence against women ..."*

Whilst the mentee was always invested in supporting students and ensuring their safety, reverse mentoring conversations instilled more of an allyship mindset in the mentee as they now carry experiences mentors shared with them in their daily practice. Reverse mentoring became an important training and development tool for the mentee in furthering their practice to tackle specific issues. They are proactively using what they learned through reverse mentoring to achieve improvements elsewhere including tackling race discrimination and hate crimes on campus and feeding student experiences more authentically into city wide forums. This further evidences the scope of reverse mentoring conversations to contribute to broader networks and relationships, beyond the individual mentor and mentee dimensions.

Reflection - who is included in belonging conversations? Who benefits from reverse mentoring?

This study shines a spotlight on the role of PHELOs in campus communities and makes a novel contribution by connecting literature on student belonging, safety and reverse mentoring in the HE context. In doing so, it seeks to highlight how reverse mentoring (and potentially other inclusive conversational methodologies) can be utilised to begin to build or rebuild PHELO and student relationships and how, beyond these individual relationships, reverse mentoring may also enhance the future practice of PHELOs for the benefit of wider student communities.

In looking at the relatively specialised role of PHELOs, this piece highlights and reminds us that student belonging and inclusion is everyone's work. If we do not view belonging as a whole campus issue (Webster, 2022), we risk undermining good work in one area with poor practices in another. Acknowledging that teaching or student support staff are not the only people who have power within institutions to influence students' belonging, and therefore their engagement at university, is a vital first step towards embracing a whole campus approach to belonging and bringing third space colleagues into this work. This piece does not suggest that engaging PHELOs with belonging work will be a solution to all students feeling safe and that they belong. There is undoubtedly a long way to go in terms of improving relations between students and campus police. It is just one piece of a complex puzzle but a piece nonetheless that has not been given the attention it deserves previously.

Given the outsider nature of PHELOs in campus communities, this project has triggered reflections about what other campus relationships reverse mentoring could meaningfully intervene in, such as accommodation and residences teams (building on inclusion work in student accommodation – Unite Students, 2022), counselling, health and fitness, student unions and, most obviously as reflected on above by the mentee in this study, security teams. Organisational culture can impact reverse mentoring success (Murphy, 2012, p.558) so embedding such work across campuses is an important step in maximising impact to support development of new shared mental models (p.566). Future work will seek to explore the benefits and challenges of institutional embedding of reverse mentoring on a broader scale.

Whilst reverse mentoring is a useful way for students to learn about safety on campus and to support development of more inclusive and informed PHELO practices, it is arguably not a sustainable way of promoting such learning, given its relatively intensive, one-to-one nature. Reverse mentoring should therefore be used primarily as a first step to serve further ends. For example, issues discussed in reverse mentoring conversations could be used to co-develop a training programme to educate campus security and PHELO teams more widely on under-represented student experiences, potentially on a national scale. This sort of provision could be co-developed with students as a follow-on from reverse mentoring. However, mentors and mentees are likely to need more guidance and support to do this. We should not assume that students know how to make policy proposals around issues like student safety or that they necessarily want to – is this students' work? If so, how are they being rewarded or paid for it? Future work could explore how reverse mentoring can be used as a methodology for PHELO/student co-production of safety initiatives. Current work explores this in the context of co-producing academic personal tutoring policies (O'Connor, 2023a) although more insight is needed into appropriate reward and recognition for this type of work.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is its sample size and concentration in one university. It starts a conversation about the role of PHELOs in the belonging agenda of UK universities. Future iterations could include PHELOs from other universities and/or university security teams to increase mentee representation and provide a mentee community in which learning could be enhanced through a community of practice approach (Pyrko, et al, 2016). Group reverse mentoring discussions could also be implemented in future work which similarly involves only one or a small number of PHELOs to preserve mentees' time and provide an opportunity for peer idea sharing and community building.

Closing thoughts

The approach of this paper is not to sweep under the carpet the extremely serious issues highlighted in recent research about campus policing and security teams' interactions with students, particularly students from minoritised backgrounds (Joseph-Salisbury, et al, 2023). Instead, in acknowledging the increasing presence of campus police and security teams on UK campuses since the COVID19 pandemic, it focuses on how building partnerships between students and PHELOs, where students feel empowered as mentors and experts by experience, may support in creating cultural change on campuses and begin to contribute towards repairing some of the damage done. Whilst this is one small part of a much bigger, extremely complex landscape relating to policing and minoritised communities, that does not mean we should do nothing about it. All universities and PHELOs/police departments working with universities and campus security teams have a collective responsibility to take meaningful action in this space. This work seeks to support HE leaders and

PHELOs/security teams to move towards such positive actions, in partnership with students.

This work has stimulated thought about reverse mentoring as a vehicle to discuss current issues that we face as a sector in partnership with students who are likely to be most affected by such issues. This project focused on student safety. However, other issues such as the cost-of-living crisis and the rise of artificial intelligence to name a few could be mutually explored through reverse mentoring, centring under-represented student voices in policy discussions that impact them, in partnership with staff, leaders and third space community members.

This project highlights a broader issue around the importance of time and space to build meaningful relationships when asking students and staff to engage in co-production of knowledge. It may be more difficult to engage authentically in such activities where we do not know or understand one another. When we attempt to collaborate across divides without explicitly acknowledging and exploring those divides, we miss an opportunity to go deeper in our collaborative efforts and form relationships which extend beyond the confines of the project, promoting more positive and inclusive micro-cultures of change and possibility in the future.

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