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# HARNESSING THE SYNERGIES OF THE EDEN COMMUNITY: THE EDEN MENTORING PROGRAMME

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## Summary

In 2017, EDEN leadership began exploring strategies for capturing and mobilising the synergies and expertise of the EDEN Fellows -- an expert group of professional researchers, educators, and practitioners within the field of online and distance learning (ODL) -- and in 2018 the EDEN Council of Fellows was established. Emerging from this venture came a mentoring programme meant to capitalise on the experience of the EDEN Fellows, while also providing coaching and guidance for EDEN members. This paper explores various types of mentoring models and how these have been applied within the EDEN Council of Fellows framework, while also presenting and discussing results of the initial pilot of the EDEN mentoring programme.

**Keywords:** mentoring, leadership development, EDEN Fellows

## Introduction

### *What is mentoring?*

The practice of mentoring has its roots in coaching, the two being considered sister-disciplines by Guccione and Hutchinson (2021). Both involve “A designed conversation to aid the clarification and achievement of an individual’s goal(s) and to help them capture the learning involved in the processes of doing so” (p. 7). What mentoring adds is experience-based input, in the form of advice and guidance. Mentoring requires investment in the training of mentors and ensuring that both mentors and mentees have sufficient time for the mentoring relationship to be fruitful (Solansky, 2010), as well as agreement on expectations between the mentor and mentee (Guccione & Hutchinson, 2021). Like coaching, mentoring demands that the mentor adopt an appropriate posture grounded in listening, empowering the mentee to devise their own strategies for advancing. A mentor will be adept at choosing the appropriate moments for distilling advice and guidance based on their own experience.

### *What are the different kinds of mentoring?*

#### *Mentoring doctoral students*

Mentoring doctoral students involves a supportive, personal relationship which not only provides study guidance, but also introduces them to the academic community and to professional networks with a view to contributing to launching their academic career (Yob & Crawford, 2012). This role is traditionally fulfilled by the doctoral supervisor, although mentors external to that relationship may intervene, particularly when it comes to psychosocial aspects such as emotional support.

#### *Mentoring for academic development*

As Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in academia moves from a transmissive, delivery model to more facilitated, discussion-based approaches (Guccione & Hutchinson, 2021), coaching and mentoring play a key role in this emerging landscape of academic development. Such forms of personalised development are aimed at empowering individuals to better understand the context in which they work, identifying their own strengths and potential as well as challenges and opportunities.

#### *Mentoring as leadership development*

Mentoring has been identified as a key form of leadership development alongside other approaches such as coaching, 360° feedback, networking, job assignments and action learning (Day, 2000). According to Day (2000) and later work (Day et al., 2014; Dopson et al., 2019; Spendlove, 2007), it is important to distinguish between individual leader development and leadership development, the latter referring to actions designed to increase the leadership capacity of an organisation. Since mentoring is a relationship between individuals, it could be understood to come under the umbrella of leader development, however if a mentoring programme is initiated strategically at organisational level, it could well indeed contribute to the goal of increasing such leadership capacity.

## *Mentoring within a professional community*

Professional communities such as EDEN bring together large numbers of individuals from diverse backgrounds and at different levels of experience, from those entering the profession to renowned experts in the field. One of the characteristics of mentoring in such a community is that this takes place in a space beyond the immediate professional environment of both the mentors and the mentees. Such a context allows for greater freedom of expression as well as depth and breadth, but also brings with it the challenge of exposure to confidential information about a particular institution and those who work there, especially in a relatively concentrated field such as Open, Distance and Digital Education where many people know each other and where there may even be competition between individuals and organisations. As we shall see later, the ethics of mentoring are of prime importance.

## **Background**

### ***Professional recognition - the EDEN Fellows and Senior Fellows Awards***

The EDEN Fellowship Programme was created in 1997 with the first Awards presented at the 2007 EDEN Annual Conference in Naples. The purpose of the EDEN Fellows Programme is to provide professional recognition, validation, and support to EDEN members in the field of online, open and distance education in Europe. Specifically, these awards recognise service and support of EDEN activities, projects, and governance; status and professional experience in the field; research and leadership expertise; broader contributions to the profession and Europe. As part of the transition from EDEN UK to EDEN Digital Learning Europe (EDEN DLE), the EDEN Fellows Awards were transferred to the new organisation in 2022, with all Fellows and Senior Fellows carrying forward their recognition. To date (June 2022), EDEN Fellowship has been awarded to 115 individuals: 71 Fellows and 44 Senior Fellows.

### ***The EDEN Fellows Council***

While this recognition is awarded to individuals, these individuals form a network that represents an invaluable body of collective knowledge, experience and expertise. It was thus decided to bring the community together in the form of the EDEN Fellows Council, established at the 2018 EDEN UK Annual Conference in Genoa, and with the first elected representatives taking office in 2019. The role of the EDEN Fellows Council is a) to provide strategic input to the EDEN DLE Management Board, drawing on the extensive experience and expertise in online, open and distance education of the body of EDEN Fellows and Senior Fellows, and b) to act as ambassadors for EDEN and for the field of online, open and distance education with Europe and internationally. The EDEN Fellows Council is an advisory body and not part of the formal governance structure of EDEN Digital Learning Europe. Since its inception, the EDEN Fellows Council has carried out a number of initiatives designed to support the EDEN community in various ways, from contributing to the strategic development of EDEN to setting up a mentoring programme. This latter initiative is the subject of this paper.

### ***The EDEN Mentoring Programme***

The EDEN mentoring programme was the brainchild of Senior Fellow, Don Olcott, Jr., who also served as vice-chair then chair for 2021-2022 within the Fellows Council. The purpose of the programme was to capitalise upon and leverage the extensive talent, skills, leadership, and experience of EDEN Fellows for the benefit of EDEN and its members. It is important to note that the EDEN Mentoring Programme has not been designed for doctoral students, who have their own specific relationships with their PhD supervisors, and it would be inappropriate for EDEN mentors to interfere in these processes. The EDEN Mentoring Programme has been designed as professionals supporting professionals, whatever their level of responsibility: even highly experienced individuals in governance roles in Higher Education recognise the importance of mentoring, and external mentoring in particular, as a means to further develop their leadership (Arnold, 2021).

Below is a summary of the timeline from conception to the formal launch of the EDEN Mentoring Programme.



Figure 1: Timeline from conception to pilots to formal launch of the EDEN Mentoring Programme

## Methodology

This paper focuses on the design and preparation stage as well as the analysis of the results of the four pilots in answer to the following Research Questions (RQ):

- RQ1: How to provide opportunities for EDEN members to capitalise and gain from the experience and knowledge of its Fellows?
- RQ2: How to build and structure a mentoring programme within EDEN's organisational framework?

## Design

The mentoring programme has been designed to address the needs of four primary stakeholder groups:

- *EDEN Secretariat*, giving the organisation increased visibility and expanding upon its service offerings,
- *EDEN Senior Fellows/Fellows and Members*, who have an opportunity as mentors to share their valuable expertise and experience with others across EDEN,
- *Mentees*, who can benefit from the chance to develop professionally and grow their networks,
- *EDEN Member Institutions*, which benefit from the ongoing professional development of staff members.

Critical to the success of the programme has been the way in which it aligns with the broader core values of EDEN and the EDEN community, specifically values of accessibility, quality, innovation, collegiality, engagement, and empowerment within the area of professional development. As mentioned previously, the purpose of the programme is not for mentoring doctoral students, but rather the ongoing mentorship of EDEN members according to their individual professional development needs. Mentorships can be requested individually (1:1) or as a group (1:many or many:many), and according to a set period of time (e.g., 6 weeks, 3-6 months, one year). In addition, clear objectives and objectives are defined and mutually agreed upon as part of the mentoring relationship. In this way, the EDEN Fellows Council hoped to address the two primary issues that have arisen in organisations similar to EDEN, such as the Australasian Council on Open, Distance and e-Learning (ACODE, <https://www.acode.edu.au/>) and the Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education (Ascilite, <https://ascilite.org/>), these being time restrictions of mentors and mentees and unclear objectives/deliverables.

## Preparation

Potential mentors were identified by invitation, which was sent to the body of EDEN Fellows and Senior Fellows and resulted in 20 expressions of interest. Potential mentees were also identified by invitation, which was

communicated widely to the whole EDEN community with the support of the EDEN UK secretariat. Both populations were informed about the aims of the Mentoring Programme and were asked to give their consent for the results to be referred to in research and communication about the programme.

A code of practice for the programme and a mentor-mentee agreement form were developed, adapted from resources provided by Guccione and Hutchinson (2021). This code of practice outlined key principles of the mentoring programme: clear and informed communication that supports informed choice by participants, coaching activities defined according to mentee and programme needs and that support the mentee's professional development, a clear mentor agreement or contract outlining the parameters of the mentoring relationship, supportive signposting throughout the mentoring relationship, recognition of mentoring as valued volunteer work, ongoing evaluation of feedback for programme improvement, and design of a programme that is inclusive, equal, and diverse. The mentor-mentee agreement -- or contract -- outlines the *expectations of participants for the mentorship* (purpose, communication modes, confidentiality, actionable learning, boundaries, declaration of third-party agendas, time commitment, ongoing feedback, conclusion of mentorship) and the *specific objectives of the mentor relationship* (modes of communication, exceptions to the general rule of confidentiality, two-three specific and achievable objectives, start and end date) that is mutually agreed to and signed by both mentee and mentor.

An EDEN Mentoring Programme Committee was established to analyse the expressions of interest from potential mentors and the expressed needs of potential mentees. This Committee consisted of Don Olcott Jr. as Mentoring Programme Chair, Deborah Arnold as Vice-Chair and Alastair Creelman as independent advisor. Four mentor-mentee pairs were identified for the pilots, and the committee then established communication with each mentee and mentor, first individually and then jointly with the mentee and mentor to launch the mentoring relationship.

### **Pilots**

The Mentoring Programme Pilots ran from October 2021 to March 2022 with eight participants: four mentors and four mentees. After receiving and agreeing to the code of practice and signing the mentor-mentee agreement, the mentoring pairs took forward the relationship on their own agreed terms and at their own rhythm. At the end of the pilots, feedback was gathered via questionnaires, which were completed separately by mentors and mentees.

### **Analysis**

The results of this feedback were analysed and served to refine the documentation for the formal launch of the programme in May 2022. In analysing data from the pilot programme, a thematic analysis approach from Braun & Clarke (2021) was applied as a form of qualitative and interpretive research that supports a complete, comprehensive view into the research data. Data was gathered using a written questionnaire that enquired into communication forms and uses, as well as the mentor-mentee relationship and areas for further development of the programme. Descriptive codes were assigned to the interview data, which was then clustered and interpreted in relation to the research questions (King & Horrocks, 2010). Results of the data analysis are presented below.

### **Preliminary results**

All four mentoring pairs chose a 1:1 mentoring relationship. The mentorships formally began in November 2021 and ended at the end of January 2022, although in most cases the relationships have continued informally. As the mentors and mentees were spread across the globe (Canada, South Africa, Ireland, Romania, United States and Germany), the primary forms of communication were virtual, both synchronous (Zoom, virtual meetings) and asynchronous (e-mail, Google Docs, Miro). The number of meetings between the mentors and mentees ranged from two to five meetings over the three-month period.

Key themes were identified from the data. These included objectives of the mentorship, mentor characteristics, mentor practices, mentee practices, mentee achievements, and programme characteristics. Objectives of the mentorship varied across the mentorships. In some cases, specific and detailed objectives were identified (e.g., receiving guidance on developing a specific programme or applying a specific methodology), while in others the objective of the mentorship was more general. In all cases, professional development was a central objective for the mentees. Programme characteristics/benefits were also identified, such as programme flexibility; the dynamic format allowing for adaptation to mentee needs; the possibility to develop relationships, receive personalised feedback and advice from, and network with senior leadership; and the opportunity to receive just-in-time mentoring and to share expertise and experience with and to learn from each other.

*It is an opportunity that one rarely has at the beginning (or in the middle) of an academic or professional life, to be able to count on international experts who can give personalised advice to redirect or improve one's career. Thanks to the mentorship [sic], I realised that I have to define several aspects of my professional career in terms of focusing and I will work for sure on everything we talked during the sessions to improve my profile in the near future. (Mentee 3)*

Mentees identified specific mentor characteristics that were important to them, from the mentor's extensive international experience and in-depth knowledge to the mentor's authenticity and their ability to nurture supportive and welcoming environments for the mentees. Mentor practices that were beneficial to mentees included the mentor asking questions to deepen the conversation and generate curiosity, assisting in shaping academic and professional goals, sharing knowledge, resources, and experiences, and providing feedback, adapting to the mentee context.

*At all times, [Mentor 2] adapted to my objectives, needs and specific professional context, asking beforehand what they were in order to prepare the sessions. Throughout the mentoring, [Mentor 2] took care to match his expertise to my needs and vice versa, which I think is crucial for this type of programme. Moreover, he went further, even proposing future collaborations to work together on research or publications when I had the opportunity. (Mentee 2)*

*As a doctoral student, having access to mentors outside of the doctoral program feels like an essential step in building community. Having freedom to fail, learn at your own pace, and feeling supported have given me a greater sense of belonging. (Mentee 4)*

Mentee practices were also described, for example, defining goals and objectives for the mentorship, documenting and reflecting upon the mentoring experience both during and after the mentorship (e.g., using a reflective journal), and reporting on key results of and next steps for the mentorship, as well as application after the mentoring relationship. *Mentee achievements* was another theme, with mentees reporting that they were able to build community and relationships and to achieve a sense of belonging, as well as become more reflective. All participants reported a positive working relationship within the mentorships and that the mentoring programme met and at times exceeded their expectations -- and all would further recommend the programme.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Among the significant lessons learned during the setting up of the pilots was the need for clear communication, not only about the programme itself but about the very role of mentors and mentees. Some of the individuals who responded were unclear as to whether they were proposing to be mentor or mentee, on the basis of preconceptions that it was a programme for mentoring doctoral students. The Mentoring Programme Committee took this on board in the refinements to the documentation, resulting in the comprehensive 2022-2023 EDEN Mentoring Programme Brochure<sup>1</sup>. This need for clarity extends to the mentoring relationship themselves in setting expectations (Guccione & Hutchinson, 2021) and was addressed in feedback to the mentors.

In reflecting upon the research questions, the initial questionnaire data and analysis indicates that the Mentoring Programme has indeed the potential to and *has* given EDEN members opportunities for capitalising on Fellows' knowledge and experience (RQ1) and that this has been a positive result of the pilot, as evidenced by mentees' satisfaction with the programme. Olcott (personal communication, March 16, 2022) has also pointed out that "three of the four mentees who participated were experienced professionals – we are all... engaged in continuous learning and professional development". The detailed account of the background, preparation and methodology presented in this paper serves to answer RQ2: How to build and structure a mentoring programme within EDEN's organisational framework? Both questions require additional exploration and reflection as the programme grows.

The next phase of the programme will involve making further improvements to this EDEN offering. In their feedback, mentors and mentees have suggested gathering more information about the mentee during the application process, offering longer mentoring periods as needed, reviewing the readiness of the mentee for the mentorship, and promoting more mentee reflection and tracking of challenges, solutions, and outcomes. Mentors noted that they would have liked more time for the mentorship -- a finding also reflected in the mentorship programme experiences

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<sup>1</sup> <https://eden-europe.eu/2022-2023-eden-mentoring-programme/>

of Ascilite and ACODE. Mentors also recommended that mentees more clearly document their main issues and agreements on next steps/actions, reduce the reflection time to twice during the mentorship (midway and the end of the experience, identify fewer and more achievable objectives within the timeframe, and to have a better understanding of how mentors and mentees are matched. The authors also see a need to refine the questionnaire/survey and combine it with semi-structured interviews, opening up the possibility to apply techniques such as Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to identify additional themes in the data.

The authors recognise that the four pilots represent a limited dataset, and that more significant conclusions will be made possible by analysing data from the full 2022-2023 Mentoring Programme, which we hope to present at a future EDEN Conference. The following quote from a communication to mentors summarises the main outcomes of the pilot:

*The mentorships were very successful and consistent with other mentoring programmes, the two issues that arose during the pilot evaluation were ensuring 1) clear objectives of the outcomes of the mentorship; and 2) recognising the time demands on today's professional and that minimally a mentorship should be 4-6 months. We knew this going in but having data to support it is validating. (Olcott, personal communication, March 16th 2022)*

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