





# A virtuous circle

A ground-breaking mentoring scheme by Oxford Brookes University aims to encourage more students to develop long-term careers in the industry, reports Jane Renton

**Alex Henk is about to graduate from Oxford Brookes and is busy considering his options. "Hospitality is built upon personal relationships. You have to be quick on your feet because otherwise you can miss out," says the 22-year-old as he approaches his finals.**

In a pre-recession world Henk might have considered the perfect job as being working in some capacity for Marcus Evans, the organiser of live business, sporting and leisure events and conferences. It would be a dream job, but the only trouble is that they don't tend to do "direct entry".

However, contract catering does and Henk increasingly views it as a means of gaining sufficient expertise to eventually be able to attract employers such as Evans. As Henk ponders all these options, he has excellent advice that he can call upon. He has his own personal mentor, Tim West, chairman of contract caterer Lexington, who has already provided invaluable support to the young man during his last crucial year at university.

"I've found it incredibly helpful to have Tim as my mentor," says Henk. "I know he's incredibly busy, but he's made the effort to come to Oxford to see me – twice in fact. He's had a good look at my CV and given me a lot of advice. He's even offered to put me in front of one of his colleagues, who doesn't know me, to put me through my interview paces."

West, who has also remained in touch with his protégée through phone and e-mail, has also invited him to Lexington's London offices and introduced him to managers who can give the young man insights into what a career in contract catering might involve.

But that's not the full extent of the help on offer. West, who is also a former graduate of Oxford Brookes, is one of a network of 94 mentors that Henk and his fellow final year students can call upon for help and advice. There are several major networking opportunities when mentors, mentees and former alumni from the university's hospitality department meet up to discuss career and sometimes even personal issues.

It represents a highly influential network of some of the key players within the industry that not only benefits the students involved, but also the business leaders involved. "The scheme, I think, represents a virtuous circle between academia, industry and the students," explains West.

That sentiment is endorsed by Paul Bloomfield, chef proprietor of London-based event caterer Catzest, the man behind product development at the Covent Garden Soup Company and Lloyd Grossman sauces, who has also been a visiting fellow at the university for the past 12 years. "Just being with these bright-eyed students tempers everything you say and do," he says. "Their enthusiasm feeds back into your own life, which is wonderful."

The scheme, the Bacchus Mentoring Programme, which was founded three years ago by the university's department of Hospitality, Leisure and Tourism Management, is the brainchild of senior lecturer Dr Judie Gannon, who prior to her career in academia worked for Directors Table, now part



Tim West



Oxford Brookes University

of Sodexo, as well as in hotels and restaurants in her native city of Newcastle. She wanted to do something to stop the heavy haemorrhaging of graduates from the hospitality industry.

“What tends to happen is that after five to seven years of graduation, many of them will have left the industry all together,” she explains. “Basically, what happens is that they do not make the best career moves, or they find the simply cannot work out their next move.”

Hospitality graduates also often possess excellent, transferable job skills that are attractive to employers outside their immediate industry. Many of them get quickly poached. Gannon wanted to ensure that the departing students made better informed choices about where they ended up working. “We wanted to make sure they found better industry engagements and at the same time we wanted to bring the industry into the classroom.”

Mentoring was key to all of this. “During my own doctoral studies on the management of general managers, I was struck by the number of times mentoring was mentioned as critical to managers’ career success,” says Gannon. “Mentoring is all about confidence building,” continues Gannon, who has gone on and qualified as both a mentor and certified coach. She remembers struggling years earlier with her own doctoral dissertation for her PhD and being challenged by one of her academic supervisors. “She turned around and asked me what I was afraid of. Good mentoring is all about challenging people in the same a positive way.”

The scheme was first mooted in the early

part of 2008. Gannon enlisted the help of West, who was then chairman of the Bacchus Alumni Committee, and a small team of people with the right expertise from across the university to help her.

West, although supportive, confesses he was initially sceptical about the scheme’s chances of success. “I was a little bit dubious about it in the beginning,” he says. “I thought it might come over as a little bit nannying.” He recalls emailing a dozen or so of his industry contacts asking for their participation. As he was sending out his fourth e-mail, he was astonished to have received two positive responses. Out of that dozen, two thirds of them came back wanting to help. “There’s a huge degree of mutuality behind it,” he adds. “I think a lot of the industry folks just want to give something back.”

While West’s objective is not necessarily to encourage graduates into contract catering, the scheme nevertheless gives students valuable insights into the career options on offer. As Henk explains, most of his fellow students tend to think automatically in terms of a career in hotels or restaurants, but contract catering often offers a more clearly defined career progression, better levels of pay and more civilised working hours. “I don’t think I’m necessarily out to encourage students into contract catering,” says West, “but it is useful to give them an understanding of what it has to offer.”

By the time students become involved in the final year mentoring scheme, there are only a few months left before they have to go out into the wider world to seek work. Many of them

get overwhelmed by work on their dissertation. “Some of them don’t really have any idea about the sector they are planning to move into,” says West. “I think what we’re trying to do is to draw out of them where their natural talents really lie.”

“I think everything is much harder for these students than it was in my own day,” says Bloomfield. “Student loans have changed everything and there is huge pressure to get a job.”

The scheme is strictly controlled by Gannon and her team. Students have to be fully engaged and report back to the organisers on their various meetings with mentors and what they have done to follow up on agreed career plans.

Many mentoring schemes in industry and in the public sector fail, but good organisation, constant feedback and high participation levels by both mentees and mentors appears to have set this particular scheme apart. At the end of each year’s programme, everyone involved takes part in a major survey, which provides the basis for any further refinements to the programme the following year.

It is now in its third year. The first year programme ran with 45 mentors, but as positive publicity about its benefits has grown, it now has 94, with a very healthy waiting list for next year.

Again, mentors are carefully matched to the students. At the start of the academic year, mentors’ profiles are posted on the mentoring scheme intranet. Students are allowed to state their preferences, which might be based upon the mentor’s role within a specific sector, or on the basis of intuition, or even a shared passion



for a particular sport.

But Gannon and her team guide the pairings. They also run training courses for both mentees and mentors, and strict ground rules are established about what the mentoring relationship can deliver and what it cannot. Expectations have to be clearly managed at the outset.

Richard Moody, managing director of Oxford-based Catermasters, has been giving work placements to students at Oxford Brookes for the past five years and has now been involved as mentor for the past three years. While he has given his mentee, Hayley, a thorough grounding in how his contract catering business works, taking her to the Oxfordshire-based conference centre run by F1 team Williams, and at which Moody's company undertakes the catering, he says there is a strong reciprocal element to the benefits and insights gained. "She provides a fresh pair of eyes and insights that are valuable to me," he says of his mentee, who has also accompanied him on sales pitches to clients.

Now about to enter into its fourth year, there is little sign that the scheme is about to flag anytime soon. Importantly it has also brought previous year students into contract with final year undergraduates, something that had not previously happened. This has been a tremendous development, says Gannon. It also means that students gain valuable insights into the world of work, and for past mentees it provides a welcome opportunity to meet up with their former mentors, with whom some of them have struck up lasting friendships.

#### A MENTOR'S STORY

**Hospitality student Joanne Brosnan has found a good first job on graduation from Oxford Brookes University, as a food and beverage manager in training at the Four Seasons Hotel in Canary Wharf. She attributes her good fortune in no small part to the effort put in by her mentor, Lou Willcock, during her final year of studies.**

Willcock, who enjoyed a successful career in foodservice with Gardner Merchant, has since co-founded two businesses – Customised Contract Catering and IndiCater – a firm supplying bespoke software to the catering industry. Her work with Brosnan and others made her People 1st Shine Award: 'Mentor of the Year'. "I was incredibly lucky to be paired with Lou," says Brosnan. "We have very similar personalities and we just clicked."

One of the first practical steps that Willcock, who graduated from Oxford Brookes in the 1980s, undertook was to work on Brosnan's CV. Willcock's creative skills were a real advantage when it came to design and layout, but her professional guidance went way beyond that first stage. "She not only helped me focus on what I wanted to do, but helped me with things like practical interview skills."

Willcock also took her young protégée to Hotel Olympia where she had her own IndiCater stand and introduced Brosnan to as many influential people in her own wide network as

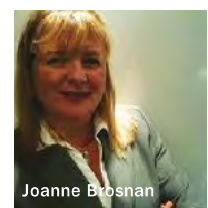
possible. "I'm not very good at networking," says Brosnan, "but Lou introduced me to so many people that it gave me a lot of confidence being able to talk to them."

Both mentor and mentee kept in regular touch, meeting up once or twice a month. They also remained in weekly contact by phone and e-mail. "If I had any problem or worries, Lou was always there to help and advise me," says Brosnan. "The whole Oxford Brookes mentoring programme was very memorable for me."

So impressed was she, in fact, that she went out of her way to nominate Willcock for the Mentor of the Year Award, which is based upon the hospitality, leisure and tourism industries. Not only have the two women become firm friends, remaining in touch after the mentor year finished, but Willcock was also there proudly rooting for her protégée at her graduation. "I remember coming down off the stage after the award ceremony and seeing Lou in the audience high-fiving me. It was wonderful," says Brosnan.



Lou Willcock



Joanne Brosnan