“This scheme was a great source of reflection:”
Neil and Ismaeel share their experiences of the mentoring programme

What has been the main overall outcome of the mentoring relationship for you?

Ismael (mentee): The main outcome of this scheme was a great source of reflection. When I commenced the mentoring relationship with Neil, I was in the middle of my AS exams. Every week I would email him to talk about my exams: how they went, what went well, what went wrong, and what I would do differently for next year. This was invaluable as normally I wouldn't even ask myself these questions and I learnt a lot about myself and how I deal with those types of situations. During my summer holidays I had a four-week work placement and, again, at the end of every week I would reflect with Neil on how it went so that the following week I could improve my productivity. By the end of mentoring scheme, Neil had assisted me with my personal statement, university interviews, the work placement, and managing my time with my homework.

Neil (mentor): Knowing that I have helped Ismaeel to be more confident, more prepared for future challenges and clearer with career direction, having worked through these challenges over the mentoring cycle. If I had to describe one key outcome, I would simply say that Ismaeel is significantly more prepared than he was at the beginning of the process. On a personal level, it is hugely satisfying to know that I have contributed and shared my experiences with someone that perhaps would not have access to such a service in the absence of an organization like the SMF.

What skills do you believe you have enhanced or attained during the mentoring scheme?

I: The main skill I gained from the mentoring scheme is being able to reply to emails in a professional and timely manner. Previously, I had never had to keep up to date with emails and reply within a specific time frame.
Communication skills enhanced—communicating complex information to none-technical people is common in my career. However, with a younger person who has not had the ‘exposure’ of the business world, this can be more of a challenge. In some ways, I had to be aware of how I explained certain situations, not forgetting to explain the ‘framework’ around the subject. I developed this skill overtime and it became easier as my mentee, Ismaeel, increased his knowledge and awareness.

How have you developed or improved particular areas of knowledge?

Neil specialises in computer science and every now and then he would give me questions to research and then present my findings back to him in the following week. For example, he asked me some questions about the ‘waterfall model.’ Following my investigations online, I found out that this is a software development cycle and discovered the different advantages and disadvantages associated with it. This was extremely useful as I do not study computer science at A-Level, and so it was a good opportunity to learn the fundamentals of the degree that I am aiming for and look beyond my school curriculum subjects.

I was able to draw on knowledge from Ismaeel with regards to opportunities available for young people. Some of these were unimaginable when I was at school and lots has changed, particularly in relation to technology. By building my knowledge of these opportunities, I was able to provide my view of the benefits that would be obtained by attending a certain event, for example. I was also able to offer encouragement when I thought it was necessary. I could assess the skill and explain to Ismaeel how that skill could be of benefit right now or in the future.

How did you get started in the mentoring relationship?

I sent Neil an introductory email, and he emailed me back, and it just flowed on from there. We emailed weekly: he would give me a summary of his week and what it’s like to be in the workplace, specifically in computing, and I would summarise my week.

I wrote an ‘opening’ email to my mentee, firstly introducing myself and expressing my willingness to help and support him. I also acknowledged that the process was a joint one that would benefit the both of us. I gave an overview of my career and then asked some open questions of my mentee like interests, career aspirations, objectives and so forth. I finished by seeking joint agreement on the timings for communicating with each other to give some structure. At this stage I simply wanted to know the mentee and build some trust, rather than jump straight in to the more formal objective setting and monitoring.
Do you have any advice for new mentoring pairs?

**I:** Engage with your mentor: it’s a great chance to reflect on yourself and improve by setting yourself targets, and then seeing in the following update if you have actually adhered to the goals you set.

**N:** Mentoring is very rewarding but you must be prepared to put the time and effort into the relationship. It requires regular engagement to get the very best out of the process. If you are a mentor, it is important to recognize your own limitations and you should never be afraid to reveal those to your mentee. Honesty is a big part of the relationship. For example, I realized early on how academically brilliant my mentee was compared to myself at his age, and this recognition allowed me to focus on other areas of development like personal and ‘soft skills’. The SMF allow mentoring pairs to establish their own relationship and provide guidance to help throughout. So, it is really important to get to know your mentor/mentee as a person in order to manage expectations and provide some structure to communications. Take the time early on to really understand the needs and requirements, not just technical or business areas of development but also personal and soft skills. If you are a mentor, just remember that your mentee most likely spends the majority of their time studying and preparing for exams. They often have had limited opportunity to develop non-academic skills and these are hugely important for any upcoming interviews and general transition to university life. Above all, enjoy the process and have open and honest conversations with each other on a regular basis to ensure things are moving in the right direction.

What was a challenge that you overcame?

**I:** Managing my time over the summer as I had to complete a four-week work placement, extra reading around my subjects, programming in my own time, and school homework. Neil assisted me with this in creating a sustainable timetable that aided me to complete what seemed to be an overwhelming and impossible list of tasks.

**N:** My biggest challenge was finding time to ensure I offered the best service to my mentee. For safeguarding reasons, communication is mainly via email and this means that you really need to take the time to write and structure your communications. I overcame this by allocating time at the weekend to use if needed. I started my correspondence early in the week and added to it throughout the week. I already had a generic agreement with my mentee to write to him on a Monday so this helped keep me focused.