Compendium for *Tail an Alum*

Advice and tips on discussion and meetings

This compendium is intended for students and alumni participating in the mini-mentorship programme *Tail an Alum*. It contains tips and advice about how to organise your meetings. This compendium is intended to support your participation in the programme and there is no requirement for your meetings to adhere to this format. The most important thing is that you identify meeting forms that suit your group.

Contents

Discussion suggestions

Here are five suggested themes for discussion. Choose the themes that your group finds most relevant. Prepare your own talking points based on the agreed theme of the meeting.

1. **Presentation and formalities. Meeting rules. Expectations.**
   - Presentation of the group: Each member of the group gives a brief presentation of themselves and what they do.
   - Meeting formalities: Rules of the meeting. Refer to the suggestions later in this document.
   - What are your expectations of the mentorship programme? What do you hope to gain from it?

2. **Studies as a route to employment.**
   - Alums: How did you end up in your current job? Which choices did you make during your studies and later and for what reasons? How did you get the job?
   - Students: What are your plans for the future? What choices have you made or are currently weighing up? What do you want?
   - How did job interviews go when alums were hired for their first jobs?
   - Would it be possible to arrange a study trip to the alum#s place of work?

3. **What does working life look like in practice?**
   - What are working conditions like? What hours do they work? Do they have flexible working hours? What is their company's attitude to parental leave? Business travel? Working from home?
   - Roles in the workplace? Gender: Is it easy to fall into a given role? Is everyone treated equally or are their differences? Is age a factor? Education? Ethnicity?
   - A 'normal' working day: What do you do on a typical working day? What more unusual duties might you perform? What difference does having a PhD make?
   - What would the alum have liked to have known about working life before they got their first job?
   - How do you take advantage of your strengths and deal with your weaknesses at work? What are your strengths and weaknesses?

4. **Organisation and leadership in the company**
   - How is the company organised? What departments does the company have (marketing, R&D, etc.)? What kind of hierarchy is there?
   - How much influence do employees exert? What kind of leadership is exercised? What makes a good leader?
   - How are conflicts managed?
   - What kind of corporate culture is there in the alum's workplace? How does one go about finding a company with a corporate culture that one fits into? Should one adapt to the corporate culture?
   - How do you work in projects?
   - What form do salary discussions take?

5. **A balanced life: work, leisure, development.**
   - How does one go about achieving a good work-life balance?
   - How can one avoid succumbing to stress/burnout?
   - How do you say 'no' at work?
   - What is important to me? How much time and effort do I want to put into work? What are my priorities (career, health, family, travel, etc.) and how do I rank them?

Suggested meeting arrangements

Guidelines for group meetings

It is a good idea to adopt clear rules for meetings that all members of the group agree on; for example, attending as agreed or sending an apology for absence, arriving on time, turning off telephones during meetings, etc. Each group meeting has a chairperson. This role rotates around the students in the group and should be decided at each meeting for the following meeting. You should also decide on the procedure if someone is ill or cannot attend for some other reason.

A few rule suggestions:

- Everyone should come to the meeting well prepared and on time and notify any absence to the chairperson.
- If any student is unable to attend, the meeting will go ahead as planned, but if the alum is unable to attend, a new date will be set for the meeting.
- It is the duty of the chairperson to arrive at the meeting especially well-prepared, to steer the proceedings and, if necessary, interrupt the discussion, and to book the time of the next meeting and ensure that a new chairperson is appointed.
- Those who tend to speak a great deal should learn self-restraint and those who say little to be more active.
- Each member of the group is responsible for ensuring that they benefit from the programme.
- It is better to speak up if there is something you do not understand than to be left out of the discussion.
- Everything said at mentorship meetings should stay between the group members and not be discussed outside the group.

Proposed meeting structure

1. Go around the entire group so that everyone has the opportunity to bring up anything that has happened since the last meeting that they would like to discuss; for example, this may be a matter related to that day's theme that they would like help to resolve.
2. Decide how the discussion should be organised.
3. Thematic discussion. If necessary, give the floor to everyone in the group in turn,
4. followed by concluding comments.
5. The chairperson summarises the meeting.
6. In preparation for the next meeting. What would the group like to discuss next time (the theme of the meeting)? Date, time and place of the meeting.

Chairing meetings

An effective meeting requires someone with a mandate to conduct the meeting. The chairpersonship may, for example, rotate around the students in the group.

The three main tasks of the chairperson during meetings are to:

- conduct the meeting so that everyone has the opportunity to speak and that they remain on topic, to interrupt when necessary, and to summarise what has been said;
- stimulate participation in the discussion, for example by asking open-ended questions, listening to what everyone has to say, reflecting, giving the floor to a member of the meeting or occasionally changing the perspective; and
- observing proceedings and calm or stimulate discussion when necessary.

It is also appropriate that apologies for absence be sent to the chairperson. At each meeting, one of the students in the group should be appointed to chair the next meeting.

Arranging the next meeting

If everyone is present at the meeting, a suitable time for the next meeting can be decided there and then. If there are any absentees, they should be offered the opportunity to state when they can attend. One good way to go about this is to create a Doodle (http://www.doodle.com/). Begin by proposing a few dates on which those at the meeting can attend. Upload these to Doodle and give any absentees the opportunity to state when they can attend.

Discussion and active listening

There are many ways to encourage people to talk about and consider their own situation. As always, this is highly individual with regard to both the speaker and the listener, but it is certainly worth offering a few examples. Pick the ones you think will suit you – feel free to try several different approaches. You will find that this has an impact on the discussion!

A good listener:

- allows the speaker to finish what they are saying;
- is clam and easy to make eye contact with;
- nods at appropriate places in the story;
- shows interest through their body language;
- asks open-ended questions;
- takes note of the speaker's body language and facial expressions. The listener then explains their interpretation of these and asks if they are correct; and
- mirrors the speakers words in a follow-up question, for example:
    - "...and then we continued on our way into town,"
    - "So, you went into town?".

There are also **barriers** to discussion; for example, one might:

- be overeager to share one's own experiences;
- offer tips and advice before the other person has had time to think;
- make light of what the other person has said;
- offer comfort rather than listening properly; or
- ask leading questions.

If you want to encourage someone to tell you more and to reflect on their own account, it is a good idea to ask open-ended questions, i.e., questions that cannot be answered yes or no. Open-ended questions might begin with: "What do you think about...", "How did you...", or "Why...". Open-ended question are characterised by an invitation to tell more, unlike closed questions. So, "Did you like the course?" is a closed question that can be answered yes or no, while "Why did you enjoy the course?" is open-ended, as it invites the speaker to elucidate´.

Stimulating discussion

At times, it may prove necessary to stimulate a lifeless discussion. You can achieve this in various ways, both through verbal input and by physically stimulating discussion by rearranging the furniture, etc.

To make sure that everyone in the group gets involved in the discussion, it can be a good idea to give everyone in turn a chance to speak. This affords anyone who wishes to an opportunity to briefly address a given subject. It is important to go round the entire group, so that everyone gives their full attention until everyone has had their say. That said, speaking must be voluntary.