

**DAL041032**

**Positioning international students for success at university:  
Evaluation of a peer mentoring program**

**John Daley**

**Postgraduate student  
Faculty of Education  
University of Wollongong  
Australia**

**[jecd48@uow.edu.au](mailto:jecd48@uow.edu.au)**

**Abstract**

This paper focuses on the evaluation of a Peer Mentoring Program conducted for international students at a regional university. The aim of this program is to assist overseas students' adjustment to life and study in their Australian university setting. This paper will describe the rationale and implementation of the program. Using an open inquiry approach to evaluation in the framework of action research, this paper will report on students' perspectives of and experiences in this program, as documented through interviews and participant observations. Collaborative processes undertaken for this inquiry included a web-based reflective journal. This journal provided a key venue for critical reflection upon data and frameworks for data analysis and interpretation, and sharing of these reflections with identified stakeholders as works-in-progress. Specifically, findings will detail students' views on what they found to be helpful from the mentoring program; the program's assistance with their spoken and written English as university students across different learning situations; what they most valued about the program; and recommendations for future directions.

**Introduction**

This paper focuses on an evaluation of a University's trial Mentoring Program for incoming international students throughout the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester (second half of calendar year) of 2003. This program grew from a series of Orientation Week programs conducted at the beginning of previous semesters. The purpose of this Mentoring Program was to create a more settled environment for new international students, especially for those with a non-English speaking (NESB) background, and facilitate their transition and adjustment to an unfamiliar setting. This in turn sought to reduce the "cultural distance" between the student's home and host countries (Wan, Chapman & Biggs, 1992, cited by Ying, 2002).

## **Problem and purpose of study**

The international student's overall study experience is built on two foundations identified by Ying (2002):

- Academic achievement – an objective, immediately quantifiable, narrower indication of academic success
- Quality of the overall international study experience - A subjective, more global assessment of the overall study experience

It is entirely possible to have a study career featuring high academic achievement, yet with poor overall study experience. For example, Ying *et al.*, (2000) cite a study showing "...no association between academic success and subjective sense of competence amongst Asian American students at a prestigious American university (cited by Ying 2003).

This might lead to adequate final grades in a student's own studies, but it ultimately detracts from a student's feeling of accomplishment of satisfaction, personal growth, and personal development which grow from a successful overall international student experience. Some of the positive formative experiences of the international student experience – including increased international interest and concern, development of interpersonal maturity, development of cultural knowledge and cultural sensitivity, and new proficiency in a language other than the student's first language (Geelhoed, Abe & Talbot, 2003, p. 5) – gives the international student the ability to apply good academic results to outstanding professional and workplace foundations, making for a solid post-graduate career launch or re-launch.

So how, then, does an educational institution seek to assist newly-enrolled students with these foundational lifestyle and pedagogic issues to? And how can the developers of such a program know if this assistance is effective?

The institution under study here developed a Mentoring Program from its two annual O-Week programs, in which it sought to develop an introduction to life in Australia and to life in the host institution. The feeling amongst staff responsible for the implementation for this program was that the O-Week program was too compressed, covering a large amount of detail about life in Australia, life in the new town, study life in the institution, differences in pedagogic styles which often exist between Australian institutions and the students' previous institutions (in the case of postgraduate coursework students), relating socially and academically to other students and staff, and a wide range of other issues. This information had to be covered in two days, at a time when the student was already dealing with a large amount of information – enrolment procedures, seeking accommodation, setting up home, and so on (unpublished papers, 2003).

A solution delivered by this group of staff was to spread this programming over the entire initial semester. O-Week induction groups would meet at (approximately) two-weekly intervals under the group facilitation of a volunteer senior student (who was also the O-Week group facilitator) to discuss these issues in a more staged and detailed manner. These induction group meetings covered such issues as study planning, adjusting to a more participatory teaching and learning style, healthy lifestyles, dealing with stress and homesickness, and other personal issues as the group members felt comfortable in discussing – such as exercise, personal financial management, cross-cultural sexuality issues, and so on.

Did the Mentoring Program achieve what it set out to do? Official formal measurement of the success (or otherwise) of the program consisted of broad questionnaire evaluation sheets completed by the students; and by counts of contacts made by students to their respective Program facilitators, forwarded to the Student Services Section. It was on the basis of this feedback, combined with a shortage of ongoing resources from the parent institution, that the program was discontinued after one semester.

The purpose of this study is to seek some additional forms of evaluative measures to judge the success or otherwise of the Mentoring Program.

### **Assessing the evidence**

This writer opted for a qualitative approach for this study. International university students have a wide range of issues to deal with in adapting to life in their temporarily-adopted new country and new study lifestyle. A qualitative approach to research would allow participants' own perspectives and experiences to come under focus, and examine and analyse the attitudes and beliefs that they brought to the Mentoring Program. The approach would do so, not by asking preconceived questions, but rather taking an open-ended, focal group discussion approach, that gave students direct voice and allowed them to identify and explore their perspectives of the Mentoring Program.

This writer realised that this decision represents a further voice in the long-running discussion between qualitative researchers and quantitative researchers. The so-called subjective nature of qualitative research might be discounted by some researchers, but this does not make qualitative research – properly approached and rigorously enacted – inferior. Ezzy (2001, p. 294) acknowledges that

Qualitative research is indeed subjective, but this does not make it of no value. Rather than trying to avoid the problem of subjectivity, qualitative research acknowledges subjectivity, and examines carefully the subjective nature of the interpretative process. It may be possible to assess the clinical effectiveness of drugs with statistical methodologies, but it is not possible to understand why people choose to smoke marijuana without examining interpretations.

## **A thematic approach to evaluation**

The evaluation method used here was a thematic approach to analyzing participants' perspectives, based on a modified grounded theory approach (Tseng & Newton, 2002, pp. 592; Geelhoed, Abe & Talbot, 2003). Based on an open / audit method of enquiry (Wadsworth, 1997, pp. 38-45 & 51), this writer developed a series of six introductory questions in consultation with my project supervisor:

- What did you find useful in the Mentoring program?
- With what parts of university life did the program help you?
- What parts of the program do you remember as being most enjoyable?
- How did you find using English in the program? Did the program assist in any way with your English practice?
- What might need to be improved?
- What do you see as the most important part of a mentoring program?

These questions were put to focus groups scheduled over two different times (to accommodate, as far as possible, the inevitable timetable clashes with lectures and other classes).

In this focus-group approach, it was felt that participants had enough in common as international students with the same institution, and the focus group facilitator held sufficient group facilitation skill, to negate any potential problem from dominating personalities within a group. Additionally, the accidental skewing of the two focus groups towards a majority of group facilitators being present<sup>1</sup> actually worked in favour of the focus group approach; these people, by and large, had a “macro” observation of how each participant in their own group found the Mentoring Program, in addition to their own personal attitudes and views towards the program.

Extensive notes were made by this writer based on these focus group discussions. These were developed into a matrix chart of common themes across participants of the two focus groups. This chart is shown in Figure 1 attached at the end of this paper. (A sample of this chart is also available in this writer's Reflective Journal website cited in the references list.) Common trends in these themes and discussions were developed from this data, and used to assess the effect of the Mentoring Program on the attitudes and beliefs of focus-group participants and their Program group members.

---

<sup>1</sup> - Due to Australian privacy law and institutional privacy policy, the institution had to send out invitations to potential focus-group participants on my behalf and (quite properly) without my seeing e-mail address details; in addition, I had a relatively large number of personal contacts made amongst other group facilitators, due to my own voluntary participation in the program over several semesters. Due to a technical error, the institution did not send out any invitations. On my supervisor's advice, I proceeded with my list of invitees from my own records.

This method of investigation is modeled on Tsang & Newton's view of grounded theory as an interpretive method of naturalistic enquiry, whereby the purpose of the study is to uncover "strategies" of well-being as those that are possible, rather than as necessarily the most frequent or representative actions of experience (2002, p. 592). This is consistent with the view that a grounded-theory approach to a study involves using an interpretive method of naturalistic enquiry rather than a hypothesis-testing method in the conventional scientific paradigm. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This approach seeks a conceptual model generated by systematic induction, not by logical deduction from prior assumptions (after Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This approach was therefore important in evaluating a program that had not been systematically evaluated in this institution before.

### ***Conclusions about a Thematic Approach to Evaluation***

The thematic approach to evaluating the draft Mentoring program captured students' attitudes towards the program; it did not seek to quantify these attitudes, nor (due to constraints of time due to the relative weight of this project in the writer's overall study program) did it lead to codifying of the thematic data in a quantifiable fashion - such as are mentioned by Tsang & Newton (2002) and described in detail by Strauss & Corbin (1998).

Nonetheless, this approach provided a useful attempt by this writer to capture these themes in a systematized fashion – not attempted before by the host institution in respect of the Mentoring Program, nor indeed by the writer (a new entrant to the field of education).

Figure 1 summarises by theme the focus group participants' view of benefits and difficulties associated with their experiences of the Mentoring Program. The view from the admittedly small sample size suggested that the program did indeed begin to change participant international students' thinking concerning the new environment in which they lived and studied, and gave them some introductory tools to independently find out more information on the issues raised in the program.

The previous quantitative questionnaire approach to program evaluation employed by the institution did not sufficiently focus these issues. The method of data collection used in this study was chosen to develop themes arising from a new project on campus with no precedent expectations on outcomes or goal achievement; this approach gave participants the opportunity to have their voices heard more clearly, especially in developing ideas that might not otherwise be identified clearly in a questionnaire approach. This open-ended, emergent emphasis at the heart of the modified grounded-theory approach to this study, built upon an open / audit method of enquiry; if this writer had developed a questionnaire, there might have been pertinent questions which might simply not have occurred to the writer.

By approaching this task on a qualitative basis, student perspectives and attitudes were able to be systematically explored and analysed. In so doing, benefits as well as difficulties yielded in the focus group discussions came to light. The focus-group approach gave participants the opportunity to interact with their peers in articulating their views on this subject – something which a written questionnaire undertaken in isolation does not provide.

The thematic approach taken to presenting these data provides a basis for the evaluator to explore interrelationships among factors that impact on an international student's experiences – thus yielding a holistic picture that can provide key insights into these experiences, capturing individual nuances while also revealing common trends that recur across individuals.

## References

Daley J, 2004. *Reflective Journal – EDGA806*. [Web log.]

<http://jecd.typepad.com/edga806>

Last updated: November 2004

Last accessed: November 2004

Geelhoed R J, Abe J & Talbot D M, 2003. A qualitative investigation of U.S. students' experiences in an international peer program. *Journal of College Student Development*. Jan/Feb 2003, Vol. 44, Issue. 1, pp. 5 *et seq.* (13 pp.)

Lincoln & Guba, 1985. *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Strauss A L & Corbin J, 1998. *Basics of qualitative research: techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, USA: Sage Publications.

Tseng & Newton, 2002. Tseng W-C, Newton F B. International students' strategies for well-being. *College Student Journal* December 2002. Vol. 36, Iss. 4; p. 591 (7 pages)

Wadsworth, 1997. Wadsworth, Y. *Everyday evaluation on the run*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)

Wan T , Chapman D W & Biggs D A, 1992. Academic stress of international students attending U.S. universities. *Research in Higher Education*, 33, 607-623.

Ying Y-W, 2003. Academic achievement and quality of overseas study among Taiwanese students in the United States. *College Student Journal*. September 2003. Vol. 37, Iss. 3; pp. 470 *et seq.*

Ying Y, Lee P A, Tsai J L, Hung Y, Lin M & Wan C T, 2000. Asian American college students as model minorities: An examination of their overall competence. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 7, 59-74.

Figure 1. *Thematic summary of focus group discussion (combined across both groups)*

<i>Participants (pseudonyms)</i>	<b>Tabitha</b>	<b>Fran</b>	<b>Tom</b>	<b>Brian</b>	<b>Serina</b>	<b>Kevin</b>	<b>Marcella</b>	<b>Researcher's comment</b>
<i>Categories</i>								
<b>Usefulness of Mentoring program</b>	Develops communication skill and information awareness in all participants	Instilled confidence in July intake students when the feeling was otherwise they were playing “catch-up” to all other knowledgeable students	Good way of sharing solutions to problems (eg housing) and establishing networks.	Encourages communications amongst members and, more broadly, with others that the participant deals with along the way (active communications, not passive). * Learning new aspects of new culture.	Potentially very good.	Assists especially where students from one’s cultural/national background are few and far between. Understanding how to construct assignments led to reduction in stress.	Provides guidance, support. Makes participants comfortable Marcella really liked the friendship aspect of this program.	

<i>Participants (pseudonyms)</i>	<b>Tabitha</b>	<b>Fran</b>	<b>Tom</b>	<b>Brian</b>	<b>Serina</b>	<b>Kevin</b>	<b>Marcella</b>	<b>Researcher's comment</b>
<b>Difficulties in M Program</b>	Acknowledges views of Fran & Tom, but believes that this can vary from Faculty to Faculty.	* Consultation with academic staff is not as straightforward as indicated in program * Many online classes, defeats purpose of	Consultation with academic staff is not as straightforward as indicated in program. Some staff depend on WWW too much rather	* Potential lack of “quality control” (universal quality standards) amongst group leaders.	M program aims to have leaders from same Faculty as participants, but shortage of leaders makes this			Adjacent comments appear to be directed at teaching activities rather than the M program

		international experience	than consultation.	* Goals of M program are too broad.	not always possible.			itself
<b>Relationship with local students</b>	Suggests organised links with aspects of “town” life so that Internat. students have a better understanding of the local community (eg 1-hr visit to local charitable organisation to understand its work)		Can/should encourage internat. Students to be more assertive on campus, to		Staff strive to locate a good mix of student leaders including local, but there are ongoing difficulties in attracting local students as leaders			

<b>Participants (pseudonyms)</b>	<b>Tabitha</b>	<b>Fran</b>	<b>Tom</b>	<b>Brian</b>	<b>Serina</b>	<b>Kevin</b>	<b>Marcella</b>	<b>Researcher's comment</b>
<b>Relationship with University administration</b>	Suggests that M program be used as a formal feedback mechanism to Uni admin, ISAs, Faculty staff, with formal advisory channels from M groups via group leaders				Perception amongst international students that their field is generally under-resourced (eg discontinuation of M program)			
<b>Enjoyable aspects of M programs</b>	Regular contact with M group members; tackling problems, devising solutions. "Very satisfying."	Making several good friends amongst the M group. Greatly assisted adjustment to new life. Helped greatly in removing anxieties, freed up energies to concentrate on academic performance (Cf Kevin's &	Seeking where to strike the balance between self-directive learning and inter-dependent learning			K's group provided very good emotional support. Helped him rebuild confidence after losing this rapidly in move to Australia, adjusting to different education system (more self-help expected here), having problems with practical English. (cf Marcella's & Fran's comments)	M's group was very relaxed and tackled topics well and in a relaxed way. Participants found this useful in "de-stressing" about new environment. (cf. Fran's & Kevin's comments)	

		Marcella's comments)						
--	--	----------------------	--	--	--	--	--	--

<i>Participants (pseudonyms)</i>	<b>Tabitha</b>	<b>Fran</b>	<b>Tom</b>	<b>Brian</b>	<b>Serina</b>	<b>Kevin</b>	<b>Marcella</b>	<b>Researcher's comment</b>
<b>Practice of English language skills</b>		Would be more important in this area if group met, say, once per week. Also, more local students as leaders might assist here.		International student leaders can create some impediment to English practice in the group	Disagrees with Brian – has not heard this is a big problem (involved with this program since 1999)	Disagrees with Brian	Disagrees with Brian	
<b>Communication amongst group</b>						Excellent. Fortnightly e-mail from group facilitator as well as meetings.	Very strong group dynamics. (See <i>Enjoyable aspects of M programs</i> above)	