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Enhancing the first year experience – longitudinal perspectives on a peer mentoring scheme

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Research suggests that the first six weeks in higher education are critical for student adjustment and subsequent success and that student social networks and support are key factors in preventing student attrition. Peer mentoring programs provide an avenue for new students to be supported by more experienced mentor students to make social connections with other new students. This paper reports on the development of a peer mentoring program aimed at supporting first-year students in their transition into university life. In 2004, a targeted group of first-year students were invited to participate in an integrated and contextualised peer mentoring program. Mentors were selected from more senior (third and fourth year) students who were trained in mentoring. In subsequent years, the program has expanded to include all first-year students. It is self sustaining and cost effective. Mentees report significant gains in social and academic outcomes as a result of their participation. Mentors continue to be selected from third and fourth year students; however, these students now have the opportunity to have their contribution recognised as part of assessment within an advanced core unit. Benefits for both mentors and mentees are discussed.

The first year transition

In higher education, the greatest rate of student attrition occurs in the first year of undergraduate study (McInnis, Hartley, Polesel, & Teese, 2000). In Australia, over one third of students who enrol in university programs do not graduate (Strahm & Danaher, 2005) with student attrition in the first year of university between 24 and 30 percent. Institutional leaders understand the very real fiscal cost of student attrition and the equally disturbing public relations consequences of unsuccessful students (Hunter, 2006).

In the same context, the Australian government makes students financially responsible as evident in the consequences of policy:

> The Nelson agenda has been quite clear in its transfer of course costs to students in the context of a time-limited learning environment. The ramifications this policy approach has for extraordinarily high levels of student debt on graduation, and for greater levels of stress and pressure for the tertiary experience to be a successful career-attaining move….are equally clear: engagement and success are high stakes concerns (Kift, 2005, p. 21).

The transfer of course costs to students influences their perceptions of their university experiences. Tinto (2002) proposed that students arrive at university with expectations, aspirations, and pre-entry characteristics which interact over time with institutional experiences and influence academic and social integration into the university environment. This interaction leads to a reappraisal of goals and intentions and affects students' decision-making (for example, the decision to discontinue) and outcomes (for example, attaining a degree). Institutional variables, such as faculty-student interaction, peer group interaction, and

extracurricular involvement, also help to shape the students' progression through the university experience (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006; Metz, 2004-2005; Wilson, 2005-06).

In a similar way, Helland, Stallings, and Braxton (2001-02) found social expectations exerted a direct and positive influence on social and institutional commitment which, in turn, was found to influence the decision to withdraw. Indeed, the greater the extent to which a student's social expectations were met, the greater the degree of integration, and the lower the likelihood of withdrawal.

Studies have identified students' feelings of isolation and disconnection from the university as associated with a greater susceptibility to withdrawal (Peel, 2000; Tinto, 1995). Institutional factors are also associated with student attrition and retention. Braxton, Vesper, and Hossler (1995, p. 94) for example, note that principles underpinning effective retention programs are underscored by three types of organisational commitment: (1) commitment to student welfare; (2) commitment to the education of all students; (3) commitment to the initiation of students into the academic and social communities of an institution. Such a model confirms the need for institutional leaders and university student services to ensure that a proper mix of academic and social integration experiences is available to students (Harvey et al., 2006, p. 31).

A scan of university websites reveals that many Australian universities have undertaken studies of the relationship between experiences and retention (Krause, 2005a; Smith & Hughes, 2004; The University of Queensland, 2004). For example, The University of Queensland (2004, p. 2) identified factors detracting from a successful and satisfying transition including: lack of challenge/learning for some students; uncertainty and anxiety about independent learning; loneliness and isolation from others and from university life; uncertainty about where to get help; uncertainty about program choice; failure to gain admission to first choice of program; and uncertainty about course selection.

There is compelling evidence, therefore, that Universities should focus on promoting effective social and academic integration for students, and allow for greater interaction among peers around common challenges and stressors (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002-2003). As Krause (2005b) suggested, universities should assist students with the transition to university life by creating a sense of belonging within learning communities. Efforts to facilitate the transition to university for first-year students have included transition programs targeted for specific faculties' requirements (McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000); academically oriented peer support programs (Ashwin, 2003; McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000; Weisz & Kemlo, 2004); reciprocal peer tutoring (Rittschof & Griffin, 2001); online support (O'Reagan, Geddes, Howe-Piening, & Quirke, 2004); and mentoring programs (Drew, Pike, Pooley, Young, & Breen, 2000; Fowler, 2004; Pollock & Georgievski, 1999). Peer mentors may be a valuable resource for institutions to use in increasing persistence rates (Kahn & Nauta, 2001).

Mentoring programs

Establishing social networks is clearly important in student transition. Peer mentoring programs provide an avenue for new students to be supported by more experienced mentor students to make social connections with other new students (Glaser, Hall, & Halperin, 2006; Muckert, 2002). Evaluations indicate that mentoring programs have a positive effect on transition to university, sense of belonging, retention and skill development (Glaser, Hall, & Halperin, 2006). According to Watson, Cavallaro Johnson, and Austin (2004), peer-mentoring facilitates a blend of idealism and pragmatism that has the potential to improve student persistence.

Peer mentoring can be a relatively low cost alternative or supplement to pre-existing orientation programs. Glaser et al. (2006) suggest that mentoring programs have benefits for both the first-year student (mentee) and the more experienced student mentor. Some of the benefits for first-year students include preventing the negative effects of stress (Jacobi, 1991, cited in Glaser et al., 2006); enhancing the sense of belonging and identity with the university, school or faculty (Evans & Peel, 1999, cited in Glaser et al., 2006); early access to information about resources on campus (Clark & Crome, 2004, cited in Glaser et al., 2006); academic success (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003, cited in Glaser et al., 2006); social connections (Pope & Van Dyke, 1999, cited in Glaser et al., 2006); skill development (Treston, 1999, cited in Glaser et al., 2006); and improved retention (Jacobi, 1991, cited in Glaser et al., 2006).

Mentors also benefit from the experience of being a mentor (Drew et al., 2000). Gilles and Wilson (2004) report advantages for mentors as including a sense of satisfaction and self-worth, enjoyment in sharing expertise and gaining new personal insights. Mee-Lee and Bush (2003) found that benefits for mentors at the Hong Kong Baptist University included feelings of satisfaction and the development of two-way communication between mentor and mentee. These benefits can be viewed as professional attributes that merit development in initial teacher education and which may have long-term rewards for mentors as beginning professionals.

In implementing a mentoring program, research indicates several factors critical to the success of the mentoring relationship including: organisational support; clarifying goals and roles; matching mentor and mentees; training mentors; sufficient resources; and monitoring and evaluation (Lloyd & Bristol, 2006). The structure of mentoring programs may vary depending on the target faculty or discipline. Key characteristics associated with effective programs, correspond with characteristics that are critical to the success of mentoring programs. These include: the characteristics of the mentor; the size of the mentoring group; the sustainability of the program; the presence of a coordinator; ongoing monitoring and evaluation; and a multidimensional approach (Rolfe-Flett, 2000).

With regard to the characteristics of mentors, university students in their second or final year rather than academic staff may yield more successful outcomes. First-year students may be reluctant to approach or question academic staff and have difficulty relating to them (Grob, 2000; for an exception see Muldoon & Godwin, 2003). Matching mentor-mentee pairs on the basis of similar interests or demographics (Drew et al., 2000; Fowler, 2004) may also result in better outcomes. In support of this, a study of Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) groups by Weisz and Kemlo (2004) found that PAL leaders who share commonalities with the students in their groups were more effective in supporting their learning. Also, selecting mentors with strong academic backgrounds and using interview procedures to assess the suitability of mentor candidates may contribute to a more successful program (Clulow, 2000; Drew et al., 2000; Weisz & Kemlo, 2004).

The support provided to both mentors and mentees in such programs also has implications for the success of these programs. Mentors may receive payment for their service (Clulow, 2000; Weisz & Kemlo, 2004) or, alternatively, academic support in the form of credits awarded toward their subjects (Pollock & Georgievski, 1999). Other support for mentors can be provided through training in the practical and academic components of the mentoring program (Drew et al., 2000; Fowler, 2004; Pollock & Georgievski, 1999), or training in various interpersonal skills of relevance to implementing the program (Drew et al., 2000; Fowler, 2004). Support in the form of an overall mentoring program coordinator from whom

advice can be sought is also an important element linked to program success (Drew et al., 2000).

Student profile

Students commencing university study for the first time often face challenges in an environment that is unfamiliar and comprises teaching and learning that is theoretical and aimed towards the self-regulated learner (Zimmerman, 2000). This is particularly the case for students who have completed a course at TAFE or who commence university study on alternate entry. They often experience challenges involving expectations, workload, technology, academic orientation and application (McInnis et al., 2000). At the Queensland University of Technology (Australia), in the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood), TAFE students (with a Diploma) enroll with one year's credit. The TAFE students share many of the challenges faced by first-year students – expectations, workload, technology, academic orientation and application (McInnis et al., 2000). In addition to some of these students possessing poor academic and technology skills, an overwhelming challenge faced by many is their feeling of isolation and uncertainty in dealing with the "university culture" (McInnis et al, 2000).

In addition to transition to university issues for students generally, there are particular issues for students transitioning from a TAFE background. Studies that have been conducted in this area (Cameron, 2004; Cantwell & Scevak, 2004; Pearce, Murphy, & Conroy, 2000; Peat, Grant, & Dalziel, 2000) all allude to issues arising from the contrast between the competency-based orientation of TAFE and the theoretical orientation of the university. Each study also identified the physical size and complexity of the university campus and classes; adjusting to numerous competing deadlines; developing a more independent style of learning; and still-developing skills in assignment writing, critical thinking, problem solving and information technology skills as salient issues. Pearce et al. (2000) highlighted the divergence between TAFE and university assessment as significant, with university assessment involving complex technical tasks and independent research, coupled with the limited amount of ongoing assessment restricting the amount of performance feedback provided prior to the end of semester exam. Also, university teaching styles and materials present problems for TAFE students, as they require them to be reliant on their note-taking skills, which tend to be inadequate/under-developed (Pearce et al., 2000).

Planning interventions to aid the transition of students requires an understanding of the distinction between the learning processes involved in TAFE and at the university. Of particular relevance to our study are models of learning processes highlighting the factors involved in aiding the transition from externally regulated learning that characterises TAFE study to the more self-regulated learning that characterises university study. Ten Cate, Snell, Mann, and Vermunt (2004) describe three different levels of guidance: (1) full external guidance from the teacher only as exemplified in TAFE courses, (2) shared guidance, where the teacher and student work together, and (3) full internal guidance where the student regulates their own learning independently of the teacher. It might be argued that in the absence of any intervention, the level of guidance received by students at the university is the third level, internal. Yet for some students, particularly those who might have difficulties with self-regulation of study (for example, TAFE or alternative-entry students), this might be inadequate and shared guidance would be necessary.

For shared guidance to occur, it has been suggested that a teacher or mentor must be able to engage with students in an ongoing dialogue, monitor their progress, and adapt the information they provide to them to their perceived needs (Ten Cate et al., 2004). University classes are too large for lecturers to provide such shared guidance. However, employing

mentors responsible for overseeing small groups of students is one strategy through which shared guidance may be achieved. For this reason, the use of mentoring groups as a form of supportive intervention was considered appropriate for the target group in the first year of our study, as the mentors and mentoring groups were expected to facilitate such shared guidance.

The study

The initial aim of the project was to develop and trial a mentoring program designed to address the issues facing TAFE and alternative-entry students commencing the BEd (EC) in their transition to the university and to develop an integrated and contextualised program of support designed specifically for their needs (McInnis et al., 2000).

Specific research questions were:

1. To identify successful features of a mentoring program for first year early childhood students;

2. To investigate the effectiveness of recursive iterations of the mentoring program based on previous years' data; and

3. To examine student perceptions of the mentoring program from the mentors' and mentees' perspectives.

The mentoring program had a particular emphasis on addressing the transition from external to internal self-regulation of learning and on reducing uncertainty and isolation through enhanced social support. However, the relevance of the project to all first-year students was immediately apparent. The key features of the project over three years of implementation are summarised in Table 1.

Key features of peer mentoring program

Year	Mentees	Mentors	Mentor training	Data sources
2004	TAFE and alternative-entry first-year students (n=48)	3rd and 4th year students (n=9) who had completed a health and wellness unit were invited to participate. Mentors were paid.	Induction-into-mentoring workshop delivered by learning advisors and the program leaders.	Mentors' reflections. Pre- and post-participation surveys completed by all first-year students. Regular reflective emails from mentees were collected by program leaders.
2005	All first-year students invited. (n=123)	4th year students, enrolled in a leadership and management unit (n=25). No payment. Mentors partially fulfilled the requirements of the management unit by participating in the mentoring scheme.	University-wide peer mentoring training offered to mentors. Briefing session conducted with a program leader.	Pre- and post-participation surveys completed by all first-year students. Focus groups were held in the form of mentor meetings.
2006	All first-year students invited. (n=104)	3rd and 4th year students enrolled in management unit (n=25). No payment. Mentors partially fulfilled the requirements of the management unit by participating in the mentoring scheme.	All mentors participated in university-wide peer mentoring training and additional training delivered by program leaders.	Pre- and post-participation surveys completed by all first-year students. Focus groups were held in the form of mentor meetings.

In the first year of the study (2004) we set out to examine the experiences of TAFE and alternate entry students who participated in the mentoring program during their first year of university study. Mentors were drawn from second- and third-year students who had completed an introductory unit dealing with health and wellness. The mentoring program was designed to address specific issues facing these students. The findings of this first study informed developments of the peer mentoring program in the following year.

In the second year of the study (2005), all first-year students were invited to participate as mentees in the mentoring program. Fourth year-students who were enrolled in a final year core unit dealing with leadership and management, participated as mentors. Feedback and analysis of the data informed further development of the program for the third year of implementation.

In the third year of the study (2006), mentees were matched with mentors on the basis of demographics and interests. As in the previous year, all first-year students were invited to participate as mentees. Third- and fourth-year students, most of whom were enrolled in the final-year core unit, participated as mentors. Mentors participated in university- and school-based mentor training. Table 1

Overall design

This was a mixed-method longitudinal study employing quantitative and qualitative written surveys completed by mentees at the beginning and end of the first semester of their studies, and qualitative reflections or feedback completed by mentors. The major focus of this paper is the analysis of the qualitative data. Mentors' written reflections and focus group meetings were collected and analysed, qualitatively, to reveal common themes.

First year of study (2004)

All participants were students in the BEd (EC) at QUT, a four-year full-time, internal teacher preparation program. Participants were drawn from two groups within the program:

Group one (the mentors) was drawn from third- and fourth-year students who had successfully completed a health and wellness elective unit that focused on preparation for counselling and social interventions at an introductory level. The mentors attended an induction training session with three aims. First, the mentors were encouraged to explore how they could enhance transition students' awareness of wellness and its role in academic success. Second, the university resources available to support transition students were detailed. These include the availability of academic skills advisors, free programs and courses, the First Year Experience program, and health, counselling and international student support services. Third, the process for using journaling to document their experiences as mentors was described.

Group two (the mentees) was drawn from first-year students (N=220) identified by university enrolments as having a background in study at TAFE or alternative-entry (e.g., work experience, mature age). Sixty TAFE and alternative-entry students were identified from the enrolments statistics. Typically, the TAFE students had completed a range of diplomas, the most common of which was the Diploma of Community Services (Children's Services). Alternative-entry students comprised a variety of entry requirements, including at least ten years' work experience. Many of these alternative-entry students had poor academic records or no school record at all. To recruit mentees, the program leaders attended a mass lecture in week one, accompanied by one enthusiastic mentor, to explain the project. All students present at the lecture completed a short survey to (a) obtain demographic information on the cohort, and to identify their pathway into university; (b) elicit their expectations of university

life, anticipated strengths and challenges and views on a mentor scheme; and (c) identify those interested in participating in a mentor scheme. Forty-eight first-year students volunteered.

The intent was to allocate approximately 5 or 6 mentees to each mentor on a geographical basis because it was predicted this would provide more convenient meeting opportunities, but in the majority of cases, this was not possible. Mentors received email, mail and telephone contact details of mentees and first meetings were set up using email. The collated information regarding the students' perceived challenges (identified from the initial survey) was forwarded to the mentors, to form the basis of their first meeting with their mentees and to establish support mechanisms. Ongoing contact (in the form of face-to-face meetings, email and phone contacts) between each mentor and his/her group of mentees continued throughout the semester. Mentors were encouraged to write reflective comments following each meeting and to email these reflections to a nominated program leader.

Each mentor met with up to 6 mentees, approximately once per week to chat, answer questions, direct to professional help – student support services (academic, counselling, etc). Mentors were not advised nor encouraged to act as counsellors or academic advisors. They were advised to direct students to professionals who could appropriately deal with these issues.

Findings for 2004

Student perceptions of the mentoring experience were generally positive. One theme featuring in many mentees' responses was that of building collegiality and establishing student networks. This was perceived to be supportive.

[A positive was] having others' understand my situation

It was great meeting people in same position as I was in

…communicating with others

Students also identified that support of more senior students was a positive feature of the program.

…having an experienced student to talk to/ email

…speaking with fourth years

While it was judicious to choose and train mentors with background knowledge in health and wellness, the results of this study indicated that some mentors were more suited to this role than others. Specific personal qualities were apparent that led to successful mentoring. For example, some mentees stated that their mentor was encouraging or reassuring, while others stated their mentor was willing to put themselves out in order to meet or contact their mentees.

I could ask my mentor about my problem. The mentor was very kind and helpful.

[My] mentor was friendly and willing to help

Therefore, careful screening of mentors according to previous study and personal qualities is recommended to ensure success of future mentor programs. This way, those with positive attitudes and personal qualities, similar to successful mentors from this project, can be identified. While we believe that it is advisable to conduct interviews with prospective mentors (Clulow, 2000; Drew et al., 2000; Weisz & Kemlo, 2004), the practicalities of such a suggestion were not forthcoming.

Some mentees commented that their mentors were less able academically than they were themselves. While it makes sense that mentors for early childhood students come from early childhood courses, it is also important that the mentors are academically competent. In considering the negative impact of mentors knowing less than the mentees, we agreed that a good academic record should be a necessary criterion. Therefore, for future selection, we aimed to call for volunteers from the third- and fourth-year early childhood students who met certain minimum academic requirements, and with appropriate qualities (Clulow, 2000; Drew et al., 2000; Weisz & Kemlo, 2004).

As some groups developed a good rapport with their mentor, we believe that student mentors are preferable to academic staff. This is in line with Dickson's (2000) finding that TAFE students were reluctant to speak to academic staff. Furthermore, collaboration and partnerships are significant features of early childhood care and education workplaces, and it follows that practical experience in working with others who are undertaking similar study and field-placement experiences will facilitate effective mentor relationships.

Findings of this study indicated that support in the form of training for mentors should be more extensive. We suggest that this can be achieved through a general training program for all mentors in the university system. Additional training for course-specific issues can be undertaken at the course level. If a university wide mentor-training program was established, it could offer ongoing support for mentors as well. As Rolfe-Flett (2000) suggests, ongoing monitoring and a multidimensional approach are crucial to effective programs. Further, while future mentors would not receive financial support, we suggested introducing academic recognition in the form of a training certificate (organised centrally in the university) or academic credit towards a unit in their degree program (Pollock & Georgievski, 1999).

It was also apparent that careful grouping of mentors and mentees was essential. Students reported forming close bonds in groups in which the mentees were of a similar age and similar life experience, such as the group of women over 30 years of age and who all had children; that is, the formation of "like" groups seemed to work. It is reasonable to argue that mentors should also be of similar circumstance. Weisz and Kemlo (2004) found that PAL leaders who shared commonalities with students in their groups were more effective in supporting learning. The use of similar backgrounds of mentees and mentors should be investigated further in group formation.

Interesting issues emerged in terms of course attrition. Although some mentees left university study even though they were receiving guidance in their transition to the university, many persisted with their studies and this was attributed to the mentoring program. Of concern are those who left. For some, personal issues were contributing factors; however, others experienced difficulties that led to withdrawal from the course. Mentors reported noting a lack of response to email or non-attendance at meetings for mentees who ultimately left. These are possible indicators of future withdrawal that need to be flagged with future mentors. This might be flagged during the peer-mentoring training session, impressing upon mentors the need to make and maintain contact with mentees.

It is also important that mentors do not regard attrition as solely a consequence of their mentoring, and therefore, their responsibility. We suggest closer collaboration between mentors and program coordinators (Rolfe-Flett, 2000). Coordinators can then monitor cases of suspected attrition reported by mentors. Mentors also need to be informed in training of appropriate sources of professional expertise in dealing with mentees who are experiencing severe difficulties.

Communication within mentoring groups proved to be very important; yet, at the same time, it was a challenge amidst course requirements. Lines of communication need to be

maintained for shared guidance (Ten Cate et al., 2004) to be effective. Mentors need greater awareness of the various means of communication that need to be used throughout the semester including email, phone, and SMS. It may also be necessary to impress upon the mentors the need for constant contact with the mentees. This could become an item to address during selection interviews. Face-to-face mentoring was a very successful aspect of the program; for example, being able to meet over coffee for support (Fowler, 2004; Muldoon, 2004). The mentors' personal qualities contributed to this success. Email contact also worked reasonably well.

With respect to the mentors, preparation for mentoring was important. Capitalising on the energy and enthusiasm of the nine mentors was crucial. At the outset of the mentoring program, most mentors were enthusiastic about the prospect of mentoring, feeling that they could contribute to a smoother transition to university for mentees. They knew that their own backgrounds and experiences would be an important basis upon which to build further skills. Also evident was an expectation of the opportunity for distributing advice to mentees, and the potential for learning in return. In preparing them for their role, mentors reported that the induction-to-mentoring workshop was informative and provided a sound basis for beginning mentoring. Overall, they felt adequately prepared. Significantly, they learned about aspects of their university, previously unknown to them. For some, this knowledge had a flow-on effect to enhancing their own student experience. Some mentors described a greater self-awareness of the need to discuss information with others to arrive at solutions to problems. During the training, mentors became aware that their role as mentors required additional skills, especially related to interpersonal relationships and fostering group membership.

Mentors wrote about the rewarding nature of mentoring; for example, mentees often expressed gratitude for their mentor's support. As time went on, assignments were completed successfully by the mentees who provided positive feedback to the mentors. The mentors documented that their mentees grew in confidence and enthusiasm. This was a satisfying experience for mentors as they felt a sense of satisfaction and self-worth (Gilles & Wilson, 2004). It was also apparent that reciprocity occurred for mentors and mentees. There was a sense that mentoring "works both ways". Mentors grew personally and professionally through the mentorship, friendships developed, resulting in positive outcomes.

Mentors experienced several frustrations throughout the mentoring experience. The tax on mentors' time was one of the drawbacks of mentoring. Despite their early enthusiasm and commitment, all but one of the mentors felt that mentoring was even more time consuming than they had anticipated. The unexpected time commitment and awareness of mentee disengagement led some mentors to doubt their own preparation and capabilities. However, these frustrations provided the opportunity to learn about organisational aspects of mentoring as well as to examine their own approaches to time management.

Actions for 2005

Feedback from mentees in the first year strongly indicated that all first-year students should be invited to participate in subsequent programs. With the aim of recruiting more mentors, this time with no payment, we negotiated with the unit coordinator of a final-year core unit dealing with leadership and management. We proposed embedding peer-mentoring in the unit and it was adopted instantly and enthusiastically. The students enrolled in this unit were allocated to five tutorial groups and within each tutorial group, a group of 5 students volunteered take on the peer-mentoring project yielding 25 mentors in all. Twenty-five first-year students were allocated to each mentoring group of 5 students. These groups worked as large groups (i.e., 5 mentors to 25 mentees) and individually (each mentor worked with 5 mentees). Further, two third-year students volunteered their services as mentors and were

each allocated six mentees. These two mentors operated their groups separately. Mentors were invited to a preliminary meeting with a program leader to discuss planning and conducting successful mentoring programs based on feedback from the previous year. Issues discussed included the need for constant contact with mentees (electronic and/or face-to-face meetings), the need for positive interpersonal relationships, and the ability to foster group membership. University-wide training was also offered to the peer mentors, but the timing was not ideal and only three mentors were able to attend.

Mentees signed up to the mentoring program in week one of semester and were allocated to mentors by week 2. Contact between mentors and mentees was achieved by week 3. All first-year students completed a pre- and post-program survey about their experiences at university.

Findings for 2005

One-hundred and twenty-three first-year students signed up for participation in the peer-mentoring program. Those who did not participate in the mentoring program were more likely to want more campus orientation activities to familiarise themselves with the new environment. High proportions of respondents from both the mentored and non-mentored groups experienced difficulties with assessment (25% and 31% respectively). Academic writing and referencing styles, time pressure during exams, keeping up with readings and learning how to prioritise tasks were also common themes.

Analysis of the post survey suggested that taking part in the mentoring program may have helped ease the transition into university. However, there were many students who received mentoring yet still reported they wanted more detail about how to find information. In particular, they required more detail about technology-related components of their study; for example, locating essential readings and accessing information on the OLT sites.

As for 2004, collegiality was identified as an important characteristic of the mentoring program.

For me has been the interaction with like minded people and their ability to steer learning in the right direction.

Giving you someone to talk to (other than lecturers and tutors) about assessment and what's expected. Very helpful as it is a student's point of view.

Face to face meetings with people who genuinely want to help

Most participants mentioned having a point of contact as being the aspect of the program that worked well. It was clear that more experienced students were perceived to fulfil this role well.

Generally being able to ask any questions about QUT: assignments, library, referencing, etc.

Understanding time management and the university programs

Having someone with experience that you know is there if you need

Very helpful as it is a student's point of view. Simply knowing there was someone there who could listen and relate

Having someone who is further on in the same course as you give you a good perspective on what we are doing now and what we will do in the years to come.

To be able to get advice from people who have already been done this road, getting study advice was great, and also talking to people who have been through it and survived it makes it less scary.

That is, having face-to-face contact with mentors who had experience with many of the issues faced by the newcomers was found to be highly relevant. This was, however, contingent upon the enthusiasm of mentors as evidenced by the "negative aspects" which centred on

some mentors' lack of effort. Students also appreciated having a mentor available to ask questions about assignment work.

Comments from both mentors and mentees indicated that the mentoring scheme should start even earlier, possibly during Orientation week. Mentees also recommended that opportunities to meet fellow students should be promoted. Mentoring program participants felt, on average, that the program did not assist them with matters relating to academic skills to the same extent as other areas, such as being directed to support services. The program appeared to provide a moderate amount of social and emotional support. Meetings with the mentor were thought to be supportive, and, overall, the program's participants rated it as moderately helpful.

Feedback from mentors indicated that working in large groups (5 mentors to 25 mentees) was advantageous for mentors, as a form of support for each other. The mentors suggested that the formation of cohesive groups of mentors and regular mentor meetings assisted them to support each other. However, there was little advantage for mentees, as some of the less outgoing mentees appeared to withdraw from group discussions. In the focus group meeting, mentors suggested that two mentors for ten mentees would enable them to provide adequate support.

In response to a question asking "what's working" with the mentoring scheme overall, qualitative statements included reference to regular focus sessions/meetings with mentees (activities were organised for the sessions); mentees "matched" with mentors; mentors meet with the whole group of mentees (not separate mentor/mentee groups) – this worked well with some by providing support for mentors, as well as mentees; regular mentor meetings; the social aspects; mentees building networks in their groups and supporting each other; and email worked as a way to call meetings at first.

Some of the challenges faced by mentors included lack of training and skills in some areas necessary for mentees (e.g., knowing how to advise students about the best ways to do database searches); mentees who withdrew from the scheme or stopped attending meetings; email not reaching everyone; quieter mentees not participating; special needs of students whose first language is not English; and mentees' reluctance to share issues.

Suggestions for improving the program for subsequent offerings included more comprehensive training for mentors; using a small group mentoring model; flexible use of phone, email and text messaging; and setting goals for the first few weeks.

Actions for 2006

To advertise the mentoring program and to recruit mentors, two mentors who participated as mentors in 2005 volunteered to give a presentation outlining the positive aspects of mentoring for both mentors and mentees, and explaining how the peer-mentoring program operated. This sparked a great deal of student interest. One of the program leaders sent emails to prospective mentors, informing them of the university-wide peer mentoring training, reiterating the benefits of participation in the program, and explaining the embedding of the program in the fourth-year core unit. Twenty-seven mentors participated in the university-wide peer mentoring training (25 fourth-year students and 2 third-year students), followed by early childhood-specific training, designed and conducted by the program leaders. The university-wide training focused on diversity, wellness, remote students, mature students, communication, coaching, icebreakers, referral services, time management, and mentoring. The early childhood-specific training was based on findings from previous years, and included allocating to classes online, parking, models of mentoring from past experiences, email, other online requirements, library, food services, academic skills, forming study groups, childcare, other adult student issues, international students, maintaining contact,

orientation day commitment by mentors, and an explanation of how the mentoring program fitted into the final-year core unit.

The mentor program was an optional assessment task in the final-year core unit. Training in the university-wide training and the specific early childhood training formed pre-requisites for choosing the mentor project as an assessment task in the unit. The task required students to undertake specific leadership, management and team development activities to manage the project throughout the semester. Mentors were required to write a team report for submission to the lecturer and to present information on the topic of mentoring as a leadership and management activity along with the outcomes of the task to a high-level university audience (e.g., University Teaching and Learning Committee). Mentors supplemented the knowledge they gained from the university-wide and early childhood training with information on coaching and mentoring gained from wider research in business and education fields.

To enable matching of mentees with mentors, mentors were asked to self identify as school leavers, TAFE entry, sole parents, mature age, or combinations of these groups. Some of the mentors had themselves been mentored in their first year at university, and valued the contribution the program made to their own transitions. The mentor groups were established before orientation week. Mentors were encouraged to participate in Orientation-week events to encourage first-years to sign up for the peer-mentoring program. Mentors also attended a first-year lecture to inform incoming students of the program and encourage them to sign up to be mentored. Mentees were also encouraged to self-identify as school leavers, TAFE entry, sole parents, etc, and to nominate other first-year students with whom they wished to form peer mentoring groups. By the end of the first week of the semester, 104 first-year students (approximately 60% of the cohort) signed up to participate in the program. By week 2, mentors contacted their mentees.

Findings for 2006

Most mentees stated that they found the mentoring program helpful, particularly for social and emotional support, face-to-face meetings and email/phone contact where they could ask questions, and assisting their transition into university. They found the program less helpful for academic skills. However, mentors were instructed to refer mentees to academic skills advisors and free university academic skills training sessions, rather than offer academic support, themselves. Although, it is not clear how often mentees were directed to support services. While some mentees stated that there were insufficient meetings organised by mentors, they strongly supported the continuation of the program. The greatest benefit of the peer-mentoring program once more appeared to be meeting other students and forming networks.

[Mentor] put our minds at rest with exam anxiety.…More than anything the mentoring program helped in my transition to university.

…reassurance from our mentor

I have formed a close bond with all the members of our group and an extremely supportive network which I know will help me through the remaining years of my course.

..Giving you someone to talk to (other than lecturers and tutors) about assessment and what's expected. Very helpful as it is a student's point of view.

Mentors became aware that successful mentoring groups are those which have face-to-face meetings early in the semester, and maintain face-to-face, online, and texting contact with their mentees. The mentors who seemed to be most successful with establishing and maintaining were generally mature age, and were quite persistent in encouraging mentees to

attend these meetings. However, feedback from both mentors and mentees indicated that finding a common time to meet was very difficult.

First-year students who did not sign up, but were identified as those who should sign up, were contacted by course coordinators. Those who signed up and then did not attend the meetings, were identified by the mentors, and followed up by the program coordinators. Therefore, there was a concerted effort to engage first-year students in university life.

Similar to previous years, positive outcomes for the mentors included feelings of self satisfaction and self worth. They believed that they had grown personally and professionally through the mentorship. Other outcomes included the award of several certificates (useful for incorporation in their CVs):

- Certificate of participation in the mentor training for early childhood students
- Certificate from Teaching and Learning Support Services on the completion of the first semester mentoring and training (university-wide peer mentoring training)
- Certificate for participation in orientation week
- Certificate on the completion of the mentoring program in the first semester from the School of Early Childhood

The mentors indicated that an even earlier start for the program would contribute to a more successful start for the mentees. They suggested that mentees could be signed up in the morning session during orientation week, and meet their mentors in the afternoon session. Based on the mentors' feedback, we planned to start the program earlier in 2007.

Future directions

The early childhood mentoring program continues to evolve from the initial support for TAFE students and alternative-entry students to support for all first-year students. The Early Childhood mentoring program contributes significantly to the university-wide mentoring program.

The management unit continues to be linked into the peer-mentoring program. Further, study in this unit provides a theoretical basis for mentoring by exposing students to research, writing and thinking about peer mentoring. Students enrolled in this unit may choose the mentoring topic from several options outlined for a 40% group assessment task. A group of 5-7 students complete a team report on the undertaking of a semester long mentoring project. Mentors are scaffolded throughout the semester by the lecturer who introduces project management tools, and strategies for understanding team dynamics, and team development. Each mentor team works with a group of first-year students and uses the skills introduced in the unit to ensure the success of the mentor project. Towards the end of the semester, each mentor team shares outcomes from the project with a selected QUT (or other) audience.

In addition, the program is popular with the students in their first year experience at university. Refinements continue as feedback is provided by mentors and mentees, in the form of surveys, unsolicited emails, and focus group meetings. Aspects of the program that continue include:

- Presentations by current mentors to third year students in the year before they join the mentoring program to encourage their participation as mentors in the next year;
- The program leaders actively encourage third and fourth year students to participate as mentors;

- The mentoring scheme continues to be embedded in the final year management unit (although, in 2007, seven mentors are not enrolled in the unit);

- University-wide and School of Early Childhood training continue to be conducted;

- Mentors and mentees self-identify into groups of common background and interests (Drew et al., 2000; Fowler, 2004; Weisz & Kemlo, 2004).

There have been ongoing refinements to the development and operation of the program. A training manual is provided for mentors, along with their face-to-face training. The manual contains (but is not limited to) information regarding rights ad responsibilities of both mentees and mentors, ice-breakers, attributes of a successful mentor, messages from fist year unit coordinators, details of the expectations of mentors, and contact details of all support services in the university. Self-identification has resulted in some additional categories – international student, student from remote-rural areas. We believe this can only benefit students, as more focused support can be established. As most first-year students now attend the Faculty's designated orientation day, they are enlisted at this stage for the program. In 2007, mentees met many of their mentors in the afternoon of orientation day. In the first week of semester, additional first-years are invited to participate.

An additional component of the early childhood-specific training focused on "transitions" literature (e.g., Bridges, 2003; Stacey, 1992; van den Berg, 2002). Mentors stated that they found this particularly interesting as they were encouraged to reflect on their transition into university, and therefore felt better prepared to assist first year students in their transitions.

In weeks 7 and 8, 2007, get-together luncheons were held for all mentors and mentees to socialise, and re-establish contacts. In 2008, this get-together will be held earlier in the semester (week 3), the aim of which is to consolidate the groups earlier in the semester.

For 2008, the program leaders are investigating methods of electronic sign up for first-year students (similar to the method for sign up to classes, or in group work areas). This could take place in orientation week and mentees could meet their mentors during this period. As self-identification into groups of common background and interests has shown to be beneficial for group identity, we are investigating the feasibility of making mentors' biographical information available within the group join tool. In that way, prospective mentees can choose their preferred mentor.

Program leaders are also investigating the possibility of timetabling a common class-free time for all students enrolled in early childhood courses. The aim is to provide a time that most students are free to meet on campus.

Each year, mentors become more visible during orientation week and beyond. For 2008, mentors will be provided with T-shirts that identify them as peer mentors.

Conclusion

The peer mentoring program is only one aspect of support offered to first year students in the School of Early Childhood. It is a very contextualised system of support embedded within wider Faculty and University-based systems of support (for example administrative supports). Given this context of support, the peer mentoring program has specific positive effects. The peer mentoring program has had a positive effect on students' sense of belonging and transition into university (Glaser et al., 2006). It provides an avenue for new students to be supported by more experienced students (Glaser et al., 2006; Muckert, 2002) and it assists them to make social connections with others (Glaser et al., 2006; Muckert, 2002; Pope & Van Dyke, 1999, cited in Glaser et al., 2006). Involvement in the peer mentoring program

provides early access to information about resources available at the university (Clark & Crome, 2004, cited in Glaser et al., 2006). For some first years, this reduces stress (Jacobi, 1991, cited in Glaser et al., 2006).

Mentors also benefit from the program, specifically in their sense of satisfaction and self worth (Drew et al., 2000; Mee-Lee & Bush, 2003). However, support for mentors is essential, especially in the training, and leadership from program coordinators (Drew et al., 2000; Fowler, 2004; Pollock & Georgievski, 1999). Linking the mentoring experience to the study of mentoring theories and research in a final year core unit has the additional benefit of providing a theoretical context and rationale for mentoring for the mentors. This additional feature will require further study in the mentoring programs in years to come.

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