The mentor program at Deakin University: The impact of good practice.

Ms. Rachael Baron

Faculty of Business and Law, Deakin University

Dr. Jane Menzies

Deakin Graduate School of Business, Deakin University

Abstract

This Nuts and Bolts session investigates aspects of a student peer mentor program for postgraduate and undergraduate students in the Faculty of Business and Law at Deakin University. Preliminary results of a University ethically approved study conducted in 2013 of 30 postgraduate and undergraduate students utilizing the mentor program as part of their first year experience will be presented. Several themes are emerging from the mentee interviews: motivation and inspiration, time management, confidence, relationships, just in time support and personalised support. This session relates to the First Year Higher Education conference themes including enabling new students to realize their potential and evaluating and gathering evidence of success in a first year initiative.

Why it is done.

In this paper, mentoring is defined as “a formalized process whereby a more knowledgeable and experienced person actuates a supportive role of overseeing and encouraging reflection and learning within a less experienced and knowledgeable person, so as to facilitate that persons’ career and personal development” (Roberts, 2000 p. 162).

The role of mentoring programs has been a widely researched topic. A review by Ehrich, Hansford and Tennent (2001) revealed that a range of theoretical perspectives had been used to examine mentoring in business and education studies, and social networking theory (Granovetter, 1973) may have some interesting insights into how mentoring benefits students. A more recent review of the mentoring literature by Crisp and Cruz (2009) revealed that there are a lack of theoretically valid approaches to mentoring. Crisp and Cruz (2009) argue that it is especially important that researchers use new theoretical approaches to add to the understanding of how mentoring is personally experienced by students and how this impacts on transition (Wallace, Abel & Ropers-Huilman, 2000).

What is done.

The Faculty of Business and Law Student Mentor programs has received considerable success over seven years of operation, with a total of 5,500 students (mentees and mentors) participating in the program. The Mentor Program (MP) was established in
2007 initially for postgraduate course work students and then later in 2009, for undergraduate students. It is designed to promote successful academic and social transition of new students during the first six weeks of their first trimester (Baron & Carr 2008, para.11 & 12). In the MP, senior students act as mentors on a voluntary basis and provide support on a 1:4 (1 senior student (mentor) to 4 new students (mentee)) basis.

The MP aims to support new students by: supporting students with their academic and social transition in their first trimester at Deakin, creating immediate networks and links to the University community and assisting new students to recognise what is expected of them as students at Deakin (Deakin University, 2014, para. 1). The MP is based on a number of underlying philosophies including student ownership of their learning, support for students by students, personal and professional development, and the creation of learning communities. The program has long utilised the Australian and New Zealand Student Services (ANZSSA) Guidelines for Good Practice in Mentor Programs in Higher Education (ANZSSA, 2014)

How it is done.

The MP runs three trimesters a year, for a period of six weeks each trimester. It is overseen by the Coordinator, Student Engagement, who manages several student engagement programs across the Faculty of Business and Law, including five undergraduate and postgraduate student mentor programs. Each mentor program is led by a paid student leader who supports volunteer mentors, and manages the program events. The program of events include mentor training, the first meeting for mentees and mentors, catch up meeting for mentors and various other events and ceremonies.

The program is promoted through faculty enrolment and orientation programs. New students complete a form to register their interest, and are matched to a student mentor, usually based on their course or discipline. All students who apply for the program are accepted into the program. They then attend a meeting with their mentor and other mentees in the group. The students meet regularly for at least one hour per week for six weeks, but also communicate through text messaging, email, and phone. They can also attend MP events that are designed to support networking across the program (beyond the separate mentee-mentor groups). The mentors are interviewed, selected, trained and provided with ongoing support throughout the program.

The overall research question of the study was, ‘What is the experience of students at Deakin University who are mentees, and how does this impact on their transition to University and their academic and social success as a student?’ The study investigates the ‘mentee’s experience’ to determine why they were motivated to become a mentee, how they perceive and define mentoring, and to look at the relationships that mentees develop with their mentors, and, how this assists them with being academically and socially adjusted to university. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 postgraduate and undergraduate mentees at Deakin University after receiving formal University ethics approval (BL-EC 35-13). Preliminary results from the study are presented below.
Impact of the program on the First Year Experience

Apart from favourable comments and feedback from students about the quality of the mentor program, some of which will be detailed below, university data has also revealed that students who had participated in the mentor program had a higher retention rate (88%) than students who had not (78%) (Dr Rodney Carr, Personal Communication, 30 March, 2011). This supports the importance of the program as one of the Faculties student retention and success strategies. The program has also won a number of internal awards including two Faculty Awards for Student Support and a Vice-Chancellors Award for Outstanding Contribution to Teaching and Learning. The program is therefore widely accepted as contributing to student success and retention over a long period of time.

From some initial thematic analysis of our interview data we found that the MP had a number of positive benefits and impact for students, which assisted them in their first year experience. The following themes emerged so far from this research.

The interview data revealed that mentoring and the sharing of experience for incoming students was motivating and inspiring, and addressed both academic and social transition issues. Mentors can act as cultural and educational interpreters during enrolments for mentees to ensure that their course choice is the right one.

It was a very good program. I definitely got the proper guidance that I needed to move into the university, not just in the case of academics and related to studies but at the personal level also (PG Mentee, Female, Indian, 29 years)

There are several examples in the interviews of mentees describing how mentors helped with their academic transition to university, particularly in relation to time management and organisation of their studies.

My mentor told me every time not to leave my assignments till the last day and she advised me how to balance my studies, how to share my workload like maybe divide each subject, like do two hours of study of that subject per day and she advised how to arrange my studies so I now have a sort of a timetable so I can balance both my personal life and study (UG Mentee, Female, Mauritian 20 years)

Another major theme was the building of confidence in new students. This quote also indicates the development of a relationship between a mentee and mentor, and that the relationship progresses through stages.

In week 1, I was a bit hesitant and I was new and not knowing more of the transition from week 1 to week 6 went smoothly until week 6 where I felt much more confident about myself and about my studies and about my assignments. It all came gradually through the weeks and even my relationship with my mentor was strengthening every week as we met and I would say that from week 1 to week 6 I developed confidence in myself and that’s mostly the change (UG Mentee, Female, Mauritian, 20 years).

Mentors provided flexible, informal and just in time support.
Yes, definitely I developed a very friendly relationship with my mentor. She provided me all the guidance that I wanted at any time I wanted. For example, the first time I started with my assignments I was really confused how to go about it so she actually pointed me towards the library resources and how to use those (PG Mentee, Female, Indian, 29 years).

Some interviewees identified regular personalised meetings as supporting their experience as a Mentee.

I think the weekly meetings that we had, very informal meetings, very friendly, we used to hang out and talk and walk around the university. I felt it was very nice and that was one of the good experiences I had (UG Mentee, Female Mauritian, 20 Years)

Mentors provided extra support that went beyond the expectations of the mentee.

I think a mentor just help us when we have the questions and their responsibility is just answer our questions, that’s it. Just before I joined in the mentor programme I thought that but after I joined into this programme, I think differently. He was not only answer my questions, also sometime he helped to go with me somewhere to help me to do. For example, I had to make my bank card, he went to the bank with me because in the first time my English not really good, my listening has problem and he helped me like that and it make wow, have a nice surprise like that (PG Mentee, Female, Vietnamese, 27 years).

Lessons learned from this program and application to broader contexts

The impact of the mentoring programs in the Faculty of Business and Law at Deakin University has numerous beneficial impacts that assist students with their transition to University. Several themes are emerging from the mentee interviews including: developing motivation and inspiration, time management, confidence, relationships, just in time support and personalised support. These initial results indicate and confirm that there are several factors that contribute to the mentee experience, such as the mentees’ own expectations of the program and of the role of the mentor, how well the relationship develops, the amount and regularity of contact and the type and focus of the information given by the mentor. It is expected that as further analysis is conducted to work through all the transcripts that there will be some differences in themes between undergraduate and postgraduate mentees.

Mentoring is gaining increasing importance at tertiary institutions as an effective learning support strategy. There are implications for program practitioners in the broader context particularly in relation to improving recruitment and training of mentors as well as the induction, management, and communication of the MP to new students. Additionally, a better understanding of how mentees experience these types of programs will allow practitioners to run more focused and efficient programs with better outcomes for students experiencing their first semester at University.
References


Key questions for audience participation

1. How do you evaluate the success of your Mentor program?
2. What themes are common in your student mentor programs based on feedback, evaluation or research?
3. What data can we collect from Student mentor programs to demonstrate program success? And what tools can we use to evaluate these programs?
4. What are the challenges in data collection of student mentor programs?
5. How can partnerships support evaluation of these programs?
6. Can you provide some examples where evaluation in your programs has made an impact on your practice?