Choose your own mentor: Trialling an online self-allocation process in a peer mentor program

Corinne Loane
Student Support Services, University of Western Sydney

Abstract

Peer mentor programs contribute to students’ engagement, retention and success and are an important strategy in supporting student transitions in higher education. Despite their growing popularity, debate continues about the efficacy of current mentor allocation methods. This paper presents the trial of an innovative self-allocation process in a peer mentor program which supports commencing students’ transition to university. New students navigated the university’s virtual learning environment to choose their own mentor. The self-allocation process aimed to reduce administrative workload, support student autonomy, and successfully match mentees to mentors. Early trials suggested this process supported students’ autonomy and revealed factors that influence new students’ mentor choice. Implications for program leadership and planning are discussed, including mentor recruitment, training and profile set up, as well as the need to create resources and navigation aids. Future research and teaching applications have been identified including online mentoring and group work.

Peer mentoring programs are becoming increasingly prevalent in the higher education sector as they are seen as an effective strategy to improve student transitions, engagement, retention and success (Shojai, Davis, & Root, 2014). Peer mentoring is characterised by “a more experienced student helping a less experienced student” (Colvin & Ashman, 2012, p.122). Mentors fulfil psychosocial and task or career functions: they “provide guidance and support” (Terrion & Leonard, 2007, p.149), whilst explicitly teaching mentees how to be a student.

Recent mentoring literature has described a spectrum of allocation methods including: students allocated randomly (Leidenfrost, Strassnig, Schutz, Carbon, & Schabmann, 2014); students assigned a mentor who is studying the same course (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012); mentors allocated to small groups within tutorials or to a course cohort (Chester, Burton, Xenos, Elgar, & Denny, 2013; Jamelske, 2009); and students closely matched to mentors according to degree and availability (O’Brien, Llamas, & Stevens, 2012). This diversity of approaches suggested there is little consensus regarding the efficacy of allocation methods.

The self-allocation trial presented in this paper provides an innovative method of matching mentees and mentors.

MATES@UWS Program structure

Mentoring and Transition Equals Success at the University of Western Sydney (MATES@UWS) aims to: provide new students with an excellent source of information about university; reduce new students’ social isolation; raise new students’ awareness of services and resources; and give new students a personal connection with the university. This centrally administered program runs across five campuses. Volunteer peer mentors are expected to make weekly contact with their mentees and are asked to follow a suggested
meeting structure. New students also have access to wrap around support through email updates, access to a Facebook group and check in phone calls.

Student feedback has been consistently positive and participant numbers have increased (see Table 1). Mentor and mentee program evaluation surveys are collected each semester. MATES@UWS is currently seeking approval from the University’s Human Research Ethics Committee to share future survey results. This paper presents pilot results at this time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mentors</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentees/new students</td>
<td>316</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>549</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>657</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>662</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>754</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: Summary of MATES@UWS participant numbers*

The online self-allocation process

For the first two years of the program, staff manually allocated new students to mentors using Microsoft Excel software. They prioritised factors such as campus, study area and mentor availability. This was time consuming, susceptible to human error and resulted in mismatches. Feedback indicated mismatches were often due to personality clashes or timetable differences. For the purpose of this paper, a successful match is defined as a mentee attending two or more mentor group meetings as this signifies a commitment to the relationship. A mismatch is defined as a new student asking to be reassigned.

As participant numbers increased, administrative workload grew and it became necessary to explore technology solutions that would ensure the program’s sustainability. It was also anticipated that implementing a self-allocation process would support new students’ autonomy resulting in a greater number of successful matches. According to self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), fulfilling students’ need for autonomy facilitates their intrinsic motivation. Niemiec and Ryan (2009) assert that when students perceive they have “voice and choice” (p.139) their autonomy is supported and education outcomes are enhanced. By helping students to self-select a mentor, it was hoped mentees would be more engaged with the program than if a mentor had been allocated to them. Furthermore, the self-allocation process aimed to minimise mismatches, as new students select a mentor who meets their individual preferences.

The University of Western Sydney e-learning environment (known as ‘vUWS’) utilises the learning management system Blackboard Learn. Program staff chose vUWS to facilitate the self-allocation process because it is embedded in all academic units and new students must learn to navigate vUWS to succeed at university.

A vUWS site was established for MATES@UWS. Within this site a group set was created for each campus. Each mentor group consisted of a mentor and up to four students. The mentor’s profile information was uploaded into the group description and group communication tools enabled. Mentors and new students who registered were added to the vUWS site. During Orientation week new students received a welcome email containing instructions about how to join a mentor group. Once new students selected a mentor, mentors initiated contact through the group email tool. This alleviated the immediate need for staff to email mentees’ contact details to mentors.
Choose your own mentor: Trialling an online self-allocation system in a peer mentor program. New ideas and emerging initiatives.

Trial 1: Spring 2013

New students find navigating university information technology systems challenging (Bowles, Fisher, McPhail, Rosenstreicht & Dobson, 2014) and vUWS is no exception. New students who had not chosen a mentor group by week two were manually allocated a mentor. This resulted in mismatches and frustration as mentors repeatedly attempted to make contact with mentees who were not committed to the program.

Trial 2: Autumn 2014

Two experienced mentors made phone calls to new students who had not selected a mentor. Phone calls were an opportunity to better inform new students about the program, the role of a mentor and assist them to navigate vUWS to self-select a mentor. These loosely scripted phone calls took place in weeks two and three of semester and resulted in increased numbers of students choosing a mentor while they were on the phone or independently in the days after the phone call. By week five, 42.61% (n=280) of new students in the program at that time had joined a mentor group (see Table 2).

Trial 3: Spring 2014

Six experienced mentors were recruited and trained to make phone calls. Again, phone calls were made during weeks two and three. In week four, new students were asked (via text message) to contact staff if they were having trouble connecting with their mentor. Only one mentee (out of 175) asked to change mentor, which is a significant reduction in mismatches from prior programs. By week five, 58.33% (n=175) of new students in the program at that time had joined a mentor group (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Week 1</th>
<th>Week 3</th>
<th>Week 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autumn</td>
<td>11.09% (n=68)</td>
<td>34.78% (n=215)</td>
<td>42.61% (n=280)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring</td>
<td>14.60% (n=38)</td>
<td>51.55% (n=150)</td>
<td>58.33% (n=175)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Percentage of new student participants who joined a mentor group

Discussion

The three trials revealed several administrative and student benefits, including reducing workload, supporting student autonomy and successfully matching mentees to mentors.

Reducing administrative workload

Throughout the three trials additional instructional resources were created to help new students navigate vUWS, including a short software tutorial video and instructions with screen shots. Given the need to create resources, as well as recruiting, training and supervising experienced mentors to make phone calls, it is debatable whether the self-allocation process reduced initial workload. However, the resources and experienced mentors can be retained for future programs so it is expected that workload will reduce over time. Providing casual paid employment for mentors offered students further opportunities to develop marketable skills and enabled mentor progression, which helped retain and motivate volunteers. Whilst the administrative benefits of self-allocation are important, the impact on students is crucial to evaluating the self-selection method. Early trials suggested self-allocation methods supported student autonomy.
Supporting student autonomy

New students’ feedback about being able to exercise autonomy and choice is encouraging. Students’ positive attitudes were particularly evident during interactions at 2014 orientation events and through evaluation survey feedback. Student perception is important for MATES@UWS, an opt-in program aspiring to expand its scope and reach. New student participation numbers have increased: Spring 2014 new student numbers doubled Spring 2013 numbers (see Table 1). A number of new students who registered in 2014 ultimately chose not to connect with a mentor because they had access to information through wrap around support and/or they established social networks in classes. Respecting this decision and providing multiple means of engaging with the program supported students’ autonomy and different transition needs. These pilots also suggested self-allocation results in successful matches between mentees and mentors.

Successfully matching mentees to mentors

Staff feedback indicated a significant reduction in mismatches, despite mentees being given opportunities to change mentors. New students were asked which of the mentor profile fields helped them choose a mentor. Feedback indicated the following hierarchy from most to least helpful: campus; availability; degree; interests; major; languages spoken; age range; cultural information; pathway to university; and name. This hierarchy has implications for mentor recruitment, training and profile set up. Program staff must collaborate with School staff to recruit mentors from all campuses and degrees, thus ensuring mentor diversity. The prominence of mentor availability also highlights that mentor training must emphasise flexibility, whilst reminding mentors to be realistic about their availability. Mentors need to be taught to write quality profiles and their expectations about mentee allocation must be managed so they don’t become disenfranchised if mentees do not choose their group. Finally, mentor profiles should be well structured and prominence given to the most helpful fields.

Conclusion

Allowing new students to choose their own mentor has been the catalyst for embedding student autonomy into every aspect of MATES@UWS. Mentee/mentor match quality has become the program goal, rather than quantity of matches, which has allowed multiple means of student engagement with the program. Thus, MATES@UWS is evolving to reflect the shifting “ways in which students are engaging with the Australian university community” (Lefroy, Wojcieszek, MacPherson, & Lake, 2014, p. 111) and ensuring the program can support online students. Future research could explore student experiences of the self-allocation process to ensure it prioritises their needs over administrative efficiency (Nelson, 2014). There are also teaching and learning applications. Research could examine whether self-allocation to groups results in greater intrinsic motivation and deeper learning than groups assigned randomly or by lecturers.

Discussion Questions

1. What allocation system is in place in your university? Would self-allocation work in other programs and contexts?
2. The self-allocation process prioritises new students’ autonomy. How might this process impact mentors and thus the program’s ongoing success?
3. Mentees have suggested additional information be included in mentor profiles. What might be the consequences of including mentor photographs?
Choose your own mentor: Trialling an online self-allocation system in a peer mentor program. New ideas and emerging initiatives.

References


