

“Thanks, but no thanks”: Factors affecting uptake of student mentors

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Abstract:

Literature surrounding peer programs in tertiary institutions clearly establishes that peer mentoring is a successful support mechanism and a key factor in assisting first year students' transition to university life. Due to these noted benefits, most Australian universities provide peer mentoring in some form. Why then, do some first year students not take up the offer of assistance from student mentors? This paper discusses the results of a study of first year students undertaking a foundation course at a regional Australian university, all of whom were offered a peer mentor. It was found that student demographics play a minor role in non-acceptance, whereas contact methods, time constraints and student perceptions of academic preparedness were more important factors. The findings have implications for current methods used to promote the University's Student Mentor Program, and other support programs in general.

Rationale:

Since the Bradley review (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) there has been an increase in participation in tertiary education, a situation which has provided the opportunity for many students from non-traditional backgrounds to attain a tertiary qualification (Kift, 2008). This increase in student diversity can present challenges in ensuring the required support systems are accessible to facilitate student transition (Einfalt & Turley, 2013). The University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) is a young, regional university repeatedly awarded five stars for excellence in teaching and educational experience. One of the support mechanisms offered at USC is the Student Mentor Program (SMP), which has evolved from a voluntary program to become an embedded component of USC's transition and orientation program, and which is now a strategic, university-wide student engagement initiative. However, one challenge faced by both USC and other universities is the low uptake by students of many of the support programs offered, even those widely promoted. This paper explores some of the reasons behind this lack of uptake in a study of a large first year cohort who were offered mentor support.

Mentoring within the university context:

It is well documented that the first few weeks of university are critical to students' successful transition and positive student experience (Wilson et al., 2014). First year experience researchers suggest that a holistic approach is the most effective support for first year students (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010; Nelson, Smith, & Clarke, 2011). Efficacious mechanisms to facilitate an inclusive student transition comprise of faculty-student involvement, peer group interactions and extracurricular activities (Heirdsfield, Walker, & Wilss, 2008). Consequently, in order to increase first year performance and to encourage student engagement during transition, many universities have developed supportive peer mentoring programs (Calder, 2004; Dearlove, Farrell, Handa, & Pastore, 2007). In contemporary terms and in the context of tertiary education, a mentor denotes an experienced adviser who forms a reciprocal relationship with their protégé(s) or mentee(s) with an aim to provide social and academic support (Beltman & Schaebe, 2012; Jacobi, 1991). There are variations in how mentoring programs are run. Some universities aim to link students with an experienced student mentor

specific to the commencing undergraduate's own program, such as Curtin University's university-wide program (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012). A variation of this is from Queensland University of Technology who have developed a discipline specific program explicitly designed to assist students transitioning from Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and alternative pathways (Heirdsfield et al., 2008). Griffith University's peer program has several strands, one of which affords commencing students the opportunity to attend a weekly one hour group meeting with a student mentor to assist in students' social and academic transition (Wilson et al., 2014). USC founded its SMP in 1997. The program links all commencing students to an experienced student (their mentor) studying the same program. Apart from matching students to study programs, no other specific criterion is used to match mentors to mentees, for example age or gender. Students interested in acting as mentors complete an online application form, detailing why they have applied and supplying the name of an academic who is willing to support their application. To encourage and increase volunteer mentor participation in the program, an honorarium option of six months' paid parking or a bookshop voucher was introduced and advertised to students. Prospective mentors progress through an interview process with the Program Coordinator to determine their suitability and ascertain a genuine desire to assist first year students in their transition. Mentors attend a compulsory training workshop, which clarifies their position, sets boundaries around their mentoring duties and familiarises participants with the support services provided at USC. Student mentors are allocated a maximum of fifteen mentees, who they email directly (using an email template designed by the Program Coordinator) to arrange a meeting during Orientation.

Benefits and challenges of mentoring programs

Beltman and Schaeben (2012) contend that peer mentoring within the university context provides multiple positive outcomes for mentees. Whilst the overarching term of support could be used for the function of mentoring, this may manifest in various ways, including instrumental (practical and informational) support, as well as affective (emotional and social) support (Jacobi, 1991; Ramsay, Jones, & Barker, 2007). Peer mentoring programs can provide instrumental support by filling informational gaps; a common problem for new students (Given, 2002). One way of doing this is by generating an increased awareness and knowledge within students about their institution (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012). Mentoring can also assist new students in learning the skills and competences necessary for the academic environment (Salinitri, 2005). While instrumental support is invaluable social support is also of significant benefit. Glaser, Hall and Halperin (2006) suggest that peer mentoring programs can assist first year students in their social transition to university, contributing to students' sense of belonging and underpinning successful student learning (Kantanis, 2000). Participants build rapport and develop friendships within the mentor/mentee relationship (Dearlove et al., 2007), which translates to a sense of connectedness with other students and university staff (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Calder, 2004; Ramsay et al., 2007). In all of these ways it assists in the development of social capital amongst students (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Given, 2002).

Not only does the mentor relationship and peer-to-peer social engagement assist the mentee's transition to university (Salinitri, 2005), the mentor/mentee relationship has been found to have mutual benefits. Frequently cited benefits for mentors included a sense of collegiality with other students and university staff (Calder, 2004) and an intrinsic sense of satisfaction and achievement knowing that they have helped new students (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012). Unpredicted benefits for student mentors include an increased awareness and knowledge of their institution (Dearlove et al., 2007).

In light of the literature's considerable evidence, it is reasonable to conclude that peer mentoring programs are a sustainable, cost-effective initiative to effectively support and orient first year students to tertiary study (Heirdsfield et al., 2008). Peer mentor programs, however, are not without challenges. While the literature for university peer mentor programs espouses many benefits, there is less documentation of the inherent institutional challenges in running successful mentoring programs. Two main themes have emerged thus far. First, has been the issue of a non-response from both invited and assigned mentees. This pattern of non-response is found at the time of the initial offer, with research reporting that mentors expressed frustrations with the difficulties in receiving a response in order to establish the mentor relationship (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012). As well as issues of non-response to the initial offer, maintaining contact with mentees who have accepted the offer has also previously been identified as a challenge (Heirdsfield et al., 2008). However, the literature does not address why the initial uptake and subsequent non-response occurs. This information is more difficult to access as it lies with those who are not responding in the first place. A secondary challenge, once acceptance and matching has occurred, is the difficulty in finding a mutually convenient time to meet with mentors (Dearlove et al., 2007), and the practical issues around providing and accessing this support.

The research

The research project was planned to employ mixed methodology, consisting of two stages utilising a sequential, embedded design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007), beginning with a quantitative survey of the new students who were offered a mentor, followed by focus groups with both mentors and non-accepting students. This embedded design would allow the quantitative data to provide further information in the subsequent qualitative phase. This paper reports on the findings of the initial quantitative stage of the project only. This stage was designed to determine how many students did take up the mentor offer, and what form the ongoing contact took, as well as why some students chose not to accept this support. Generally, it is a difficult task to ascertain information from individuals who are already non-responders. In order to overcome this hurdle and access students who did not take up the mentor offer, a large foundation unit (approximately 2,700 students) was enlisted in the study. This course is a mandatory requirement for all first year students (the same students who would have been offered a mentor). Questionnaires were delivered in-class to a selection of tutorials ranging across various days and times early on in the semester.

Results

The number of completed surveys was 307 (approximately 90% of invited students), with 106 (34%) identifying as male, 196 (64%) as female, and 5 respondents opting not to disclose gender. This is generally in line with the University's overall cohort in terms of gender mix. In terms of age, most of the respondents were under 19 (55%) and over 80% were under 30 years of age. A significant number of respondents (45%) identified as first in family to attend university (again commensurate with USC cohort figures).

Those who had indicated that they had taken up the mentor offer numbered 107 (35% of the total respondents). The gender mix reflected the overall cohort of students surveyed, and the USC cohort generally. Age division for accepters were also generally similar to all respondents with a large percentage of younger students, although there was a lower representation of students in the 25-29 year age bracket and a higher number of accepters in the 35-39 year age group. A slightly higher rate of first in family students (49%) than the overall cohort accepted a mentor. The accepting students were asked whether they had met their mentor during

Orientation, and about subsequent contact if this had occurred by the time of the survey. Of the 107 accepters, 65 (61%) attended and first met with their mentor during Orientation. From the data, it seemed that parties who had met face-to-face at Orientation reported slightly more subsequent contact in the form of a mix of meetings and emails, rather than emails alone. However, overall, a majority of subsequent contact was via email alone.

The number of students who did not take up the offer of a student mentor was 187 out of 307 (61%)¹. The gender mix again reflected the overall responding cohort, and age divisions were very close to the overall sample, although there were slightly more non-accepters in the under 19 age group. The ratio of first in family students amongst the non-accepters was lower than the general responding cohort at 43%. In order to explore possible factors affecting the take-up of the mentor offer, students were asked to indicate a reason for non-acceptance. A list of suggested reasons was provided for students to choose from (more than

one choice acceptable), and an open field for other reasons was also included, although resulting in only limited responses.

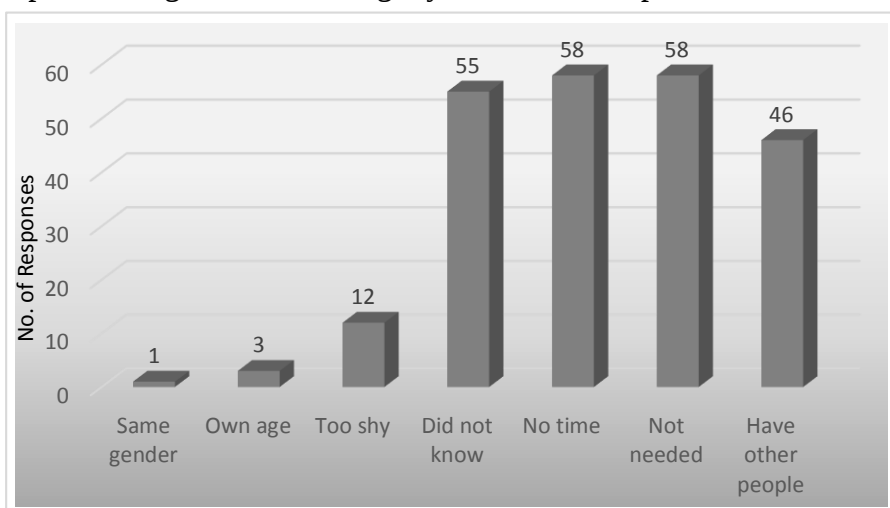


Fig. 1: Reasons for non-acceptance

Reasons for non-acceptance fell largely into four of the seven categories (see Fig. 1). Only a small number of responses indicated non-acceptance due to having a specific preference for a mentor of a certain age or gender, or non-acceptance due to shyness. The other four categories revealed more significant numbers of responses. First, almost a third of non-acceptors (29% or 55 students) said they did not know about the mentor offer. A large majority of those who said they did not know were from the under 19 age group (78% as compared to the overall cohort figure of 55%). A higher ratio than the general cohort of those who were first in family fell into the group that did not accept the offer due to lack of knowledge. A second finding was that a significant number, almost one-third (31%) said they did not have the time to accept the mentor offer. A large percentage of these students were female (76%) which was above the rate for the general cohort (67%). A number identified as first in family, although at 36% this was lower than the general responding cohort rate of 45%. The majority were under 19 (55%), which matches the general responding cohort rate. The final two categories were similar in nature. Over half, or 104 students (56%) believed they did not need a mentor, either because they felt they did not really need assistance (31%) or they had other people to assist them (25%). Within the first category the gender mix was commensurate with the overall cohort, however a higher percentage were young students (62% under 19 years of age compared to the general cohort of 55%, and 89% under 30 years of age). In the second category of those who indicated that they already had others who could assist them, a higher percentage than the overall cohort were female (70% compared to 64%), and a higher number were under 25 years of age (81% compared to 73%). There was a slightly depressed number of first in family students who felt they already had access to assistance at 41% (compared to general cohort of 45%).

¹ 35% accepted, 61% declined, the remaining 4% did not respond to the mentor question

Discussion:

Demographic Differences in Uptake

One of the questions in which we were interested in this stage of the research was whether there would be any significant demographic differences between those students who were likely to accept a mentor and those who would not. The data indicated only minimal differences worth discussion. In terms of age, older students (from 35 years onwards) seemed more inclined to accept the offer of a mentor. Research suggests that students aged 30 years and over form a distinct group as they have usually not engaged in formal education for over a decade (Stone, 2008). One barrier this older group of students returning to education may face is lack of confidence and basic preparedness in terms of their academic abilities (Fragoso et al., 2013). This may explain the higher inclination to take up the mentor offer by the students aged 35 years and over in our research. A factor to keep in mind is that mature aged students face time constraints due to other commitments (Ramsay et al., 2007) which may prevent even those who might like to accept the mentor offer from doing so. Alternative means of connecting with peer mentors, taking into account time constraints and outside commitments of mature aged students, may be worth considering to capture even more of this group. A second minor difference in the age demographic was that generally there was less uptake by younger students. Most age groups from under 19 up to 34 had lower uptake of accepters. Younger students have more recently been involved in other study, and may feel more prepared for academic life. They also may have access to advice and support from others who have recently started or finished university. Acceptance of the mentor offer was particularly low in the ages of 25-29 and 30-34 years olds, in comparison to those under 19 and this may indicate students who are no longer supported by parents having to engage in higher levels of paid work due to financial need (McInnis & Hartley, 2002). These students may therefore have to prioritise commitments differently, and may prefer support from mentors in an alternative form which takes into account their time constraints.

In terms of other demographic variables, one, perhaps expected, result is that a higher percentage of first in family students (52 out of 107) accepted the mentor offer (almost 60% of these students being under 19 years of age). It may be important for first in family students to have access to a mentor. Students who are the first in their family to undertake tertiary study generally possess lower levels of relevant social capital and consequently have a higher risk of non-completion (Anderson & Williams, 2001). Additionally, they may have limited knowledge of university programs and unrealistic expectations of the academic requirements of university study (Luzeckyj, Scutter, King, & Brinkworth, 2011).

Reasons for non-acceptance

Almost two-thirds of the students chose not to take up a mentor, confirming previously cited research on the challenges of non-response. The majority of reasons given fell into four explanations, or three overall categories which will be discussed below.

One area of concern is that 29% of non-accepters said they did not know about the offer, perhaps indicating an issue with how the offer is presented. Interestingly, a very significant 78% of these were in the under 19 age cohort (compared to 55% of the overall cohort). The reasons for this may have been a tendency for younger students to check emails less regularly. Email fatigue is an issue for both professionals and students (Lizzio & Wilson, 2010; Potter & Parkinson, 2010). Further, email fatigue had been reported as having the effect of undermining any sense of urgency and fostering a casual approach to reading messages from tutors and

faculty, which then reduces the effectiveness of the communication process (Wilson & Lizzio, 2008). Research by Lodge (2010) demonstrated that, while students saw email as an appropriate form of contact for assessment and general academic issues, it rated much lower as a preferred form of contact for enrolment and other administrative issues. Younger students, in particular, may prefer to receive certain types of information, such as a mentor offer, via other means, for example a direct SMS to their mobile phones. An alternative medium may ensure the message is successfully received, and the preferences for student contact could be explored in the stage two focus groups.

One-fifth (19%) may have been interested in the mentor offer but declined due to time factors. However the data did not allow clarification of what was meant by this in relation to students' own circumstances. One factor that may be highly relevant is the number of hours of paid employment. Internal USC studies have found that many USC students engage in paid employment above the recommended 15 hours per week (Lizzio & Wilson, 2010). Other factors for non-acceptance in this category may be an incorrect perception that a significant time commitment would be required if students accepted the offer. Many mentor-mentee relationships are largely conducted by email, rather than face-to-face, and the flexibility of mentor support may not be self-evident. It also may be that the offer was declined as the student could not attend the first meeting. Time constraints could also include a lack of time or a timetable conflict with the nominated meeting time. Focus groups in the next stage of research should attempt to more specifically determine what was being implied by this response.

Over one-third of non-accepters (34%) did not want to take up the offer as they did not see the need or indicated they had other means of support. Research suggests that even where students do have all the skills and information they need to transition to university study, they can nonetheless commence university unaware and underprepared for the required level of work (Potter & Bye, 2014; Salinitri, 2005). These expectations and preparedness have an effect on their adjustment to the educational environment (Byrne & Flood, 2005). For instance, lack of preparedness has been identified as one of the main reasons students leave university in their first year (Byrne & Flood, 2005; Potter & Bye, 2014) with some students experiencing a reality shock early in the semester (Krause et al., 2005 cited in Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, & Nordstrom, 2009). Of note in our research is that younger students comprised the large majority of those indicating they felt they did not need a mentor (89% were under 30). This group may have more faith in their educational efficacy due to recent schooling, however it has been found that often students develop a particular set of study skills during schooling that are not as suited to the independent learning required in higher education (Byrne & Flood, 2005). Brinkworth et al. (2009:168) suggest that it is not academic ability alone that enhances transition; it depends also on "an ability to make a rapid adjustment to a learning environment that requires greater autonomy and individual responsibility than students expect upon commencement". It is possible that a repeat offer of support, perhaps in Week 4 or 5 might be more favourably received, as students reassess their level of preparedness. Again, the possibilities of a favourable response to a second, later, offer could be explored in the next research stage.

In summary, while demographic differences were minor in decisions to accept or decline the mentor offer, the number of non-acceptors was significant at around two-thirds of the respondents. Although this level of non-acceptance has occurred in other mentor programs, there has been little explanation for this in previous research. The purpose of this project was to enable access to those non-acceptors and attempt to determine reasons for rejecting this type of support, and these findings were able to shed light on this phenomenon. Reasons for non-acceptance centred on time constraints or a perception that support was not needed. Another noted finding of some concern was the large number of students indicating they did not know about the offer at all, and so presumably unable to make a choice about taking up the offer.

Implications for practice

Alternative mediums to decrease non-response and cater for time constraints

Most contact with mentors, both the initial invitation and the majority of subsequent contact with students who accepted the mentor offer, occurred via email. As noted above, emails are often viewed by students as being reserved for administrative issues and email fatigue can cause important messages to be overlooked. Therefore, email may not be the most effective medium for either the first invitation or subsequent mentor-mentee contact, and alternatives could be considered. Kennedy, Judd, Churchward, Gray, and Krause (2008) suggest that instant messaging is becoming preferred as an alternative to email as a communication tool. Other forms of electronic contact that provide a richer medium than email, such as Facebook, Twitter, Blackboard Collaborate, or Skype may be more suitable. Changing the form of contact has the potential to solve the problem of the initial invitation simply being overlooked through email overload. As well, an innovative and appealing invitation in a medium which is more readily connoted with connection and relationship (such as various social media programs) may have a significant impact on the desirability of the offer and the subsequent uptake. Altering the medium, not only of the initial offer, but for ongoing connections, has the potential to provide richer options and improve the quality of contact with accepting students facing time constraints. This means that those students who would like to accept the mentor offer, but are simply unable to make or find a suitable time to meet, may still be enabled to participate in a richer connection experience than email alone can offer. This may be an important factor in making the decision to accept a mentor relationship, particularly for those students with significant other commitments, such as women, mature-aged students and those noted in the 25-34 year age group who demonstrated lower uptake of the offer in our research.

As well as the chosen medium for invitation, consideration should be given to the wording of the first offer, which should be carefully crafted and delivered in the student voice to promote connection. Further, clarifying the expectations of the mentoring relationship in the initial invitation may prevent the offer being rejected due to an incorrect perception of heavy time commitments. Students should be informed that they will be able to decide the form of the mentor relationship, and that this can occur in a number of ways, ranging from purely email contact, to connection via social media, SMS contact, Skype meetings and face-to-face, or any mix of these (depending on what is considered appropriate). Allowing this flexibility, would of course, have implications for the role of the mentor and perhaps require more from them than only a weekly email, and reasonable processes would need to be set in place. Questions of whether it is appropriate for a student to use their own phone for messaging, or whether specific Facebook pages for each mentor group would need to be set up are important to consider, and would require further analysis and research prior to implementation.

While students are matched with a mentor from their program, there still seems to be issues of time constraints which may be attributable to timetable clashes. Although using richer mediums of connection as discussed above may alleviate this, some students may genuinely prefer to meet face-to-face. Another alternative to allow for face-to-face meetings while also addressing the problem of timetable clashes is for mentors and mentees to attend a drop-in session during a University common time. This strategy has already been adopted by a number of universities and can create greater opportunities for mentor-mentee interaction (Heirdsfield et al., 2008). Again, evidence that students would like to avail themselves of such an option would be needed prior to consideration, and any such initiative would need to be thoroughly analyzed in terms of logistics such as space constraints. Issues of whether this common time would occur only for commencing students (in which case there is a problem of whether mentors would also be

available at this time) or a common time put in place for the whole of university would need to be planned in terms of logistics and viability.

Strategies for addressing perceived self-efficacy and the low value proposition of mentor offer

Many students seem not to recognize their need for assistance, either because of perceived self-efficacy or presumed accessibility of other means of appropriate support. As noted, while some students may indeed find themselves well-prepared, research shows this is not the case for many students. Yet, in the ‘honeymoon’ period of pre-orientation and Orientation Week, ‘a period of interest in the new environment not threatened by assessment deadlines’ (Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2011: 570), students may be viewing university study in an overly positive light. During this stage it may be difficult to convince new students that they could struggle with transition to university and the value proposition of the SMP may be rejected, particularly if this message is perceived to be delivered by the institution. More innovative marketing strategies which focus on reinforcing the value of the SMP may change this view. A new approach could include, first, a more engaging initial offer using rich medium, and second, a recommendation of the program by previous past mentees. For instance, a link to a short YouTube clip in the original invitation with sound bites from students who have been through as mentees describing how it helped them. With so many constraints on their time, new students may be failing to see the value of the mentor relationship, and this issue may be better addressed through peer-to-peer marketing than at institutional level. As well, a follow-up offer designed for the ‘culture-shock’ phase (Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2011: 570), perhaps in Week 4 or 5, may be useful. This may allow time for some students to re-evaluate their choice as they more accurately assess the demands of university life and reassess the value of the mentor offer.

Conclusion:

As research and practice has demonstrated, peer mentoring is a valuable strategy in assisting commencing students in their transition to university. However, the challenges of student uptake and quality of continued mentor-mentee connections require ongoing evaluation. This research provides an important contribution in accessing both students who accepted as well as those who declined the mentor offer. It was found that there are some, but minor, demographic differences between accepters and non-accepters. Significant findings from non-accepters are that a number reported not knowing about the offer, indicating an issue with how the initial offer is made, and that others declined due to time constraints or low perception of value from the SMP. Suggestions were made to alleviate non-acceptance based on these responses, and focus group findings will further shed light on strategies for maximizing the potential of this important engagement and retention strategy. The problem of low uptake is a factor in many support initiatives, not only peer mentoring programs, and as such, research which sheds light on this issue is relevant and valuable in multiple university contexts.

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