

# Facilitating first-year student transitions through student mentoring

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This paper reports outcomes of the *Equity Buddies* project at the University of Western Sydney (UWS). Supported by an Australian Government Office of Learning & Teaching (OLT) grant, *Equity Buddies* is delivered as a for-credit unit providing academic and social support for first-year students, with a special emphasis on refugee-background students (SRB) and English-as-another-language (EAL) students. SRB and EAL students comprise 3% and 60% respectively of undergraduate enrolments at UWS. The unit curriculum covers mentoring skills, academic literacy, referencing, and library use, developing core skills of 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup>-year students who mentored first-year students. In 2012, 77 students were enrolled, and in the first semester of 2013 over 130 students were enrolled. The OLT grant enabled the University to employ SRBs to facilitate and support groups of student mentors through weekly debriefing meetings. Ethical consent was gained to survey students, interview facilitators and analyse student reflections after grades were awarded. Student-mentor surveys found almost all (96%) either agreed or strongly agreed that *Equity Buddies* was helpful for their 1<sup>st</sup> year mentees. It was transformational for the 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup>-year student-mentors. Interviews with facilitators showed that they saw themselves as active agents for pedagogical change, supporting the student-mentors and helping them understand what would be useful for their mentees, and why it was important. In addition, they saw themselves as people whose very presence at UWS challenged the unselfconscious racism often expressed by other students, and even by staff.