

# Peer-mentoring across cultures: an embedded curricula initiative

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## Abstract

- One of the effects of globalization of HE is that, increasingly, students enter higher education from multiple pathways and diverse cultural backgrounds. These pose challenges for students, academics, managers and professional administrators. Recognition of this phenomenon by several academics at a large, multi-campus metropolitan university in Australia led to the development of the Local Aussie Mentoring Project (LAMP) which aimed to embed a mentoring program into a second-year course of an undergraduate business degree. This paper analyses the outcomes of the applied research/curriculum initiative that emerged out of a consideration of the complex learning needs of different student cohorts. The research team was concerned about how students from diverse backgrounds learn about university systems, assignment and tutorial requirements, the university community, and the broader Australian culture. At the same time, the team sought opportunities to enhance students' mentoring skills in a course that hitherto had focused on conceptual knowledge only. The LAMP program was embedded in existing coursework and assessment because the researchers believed that mentoring programs as 'add-ons' have limited effectiveness. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from both mentors and mentees. This paper concentrates on the qualitative phase. Both mentors and mentees valued the social experience and perceived the mentoring process to be far more than the transmission of knowledge and skills. Central to the experience was socializing, and building friendship through conversation. Overall, the importance of learning to communicate across cultures was appreciated. This paper will also consider the potential for the emergence of a 'third space' as an outcome and the implications for an increasingly culturally diverse HE sector.

## Introduction

The size, nature and characteristics of student, academic and professional staff in Australian Higher Education have changed significantly over the past decade. In one large, multi-campus University international students are 30% of the total population and in the largest school, they are 50%. The student body is culturally diverse. This diversity has facilitated the development of internationalisation strategies in most universities.

Internationalisation has contributed to the development of IOC which has implications for content of courses and programs but also teaching strategies and learning experiences.

Further, internationalisation has implications for graduate attributes which are statements about knowledge, attitudes and values and skills that graduates need for success in the global workplace.

## Introduction cont'd

It is a continuing challenge for those in higher education (HE) especially in these days of increasing diversity in the student body, to enthuse these students to interact with each other across cultural boundaries, to benefit from different learning styles, to problem-solve in culturally diverse teams and to appreciate the value of multicultural resources in team decision-making.

Further, there are the difficulties of retaining both international and domestic students through to graduation, implementing inclusive practices which engage diverse students, and challenging students to engage with diverse peers in the informal as well as the formal curriculum.

Strategies adopted by HE leaders and managers include the development of service learning, the strengthening of student services and support, the provision of English languages assistance, the implementation of staff-student and student-student mentoring teams, increasing use of social media and electronic technologies, the formation of social and recreation clubs, and professional development of academic and administrative staff in the area of working with culturally diverse students.

## Brief Literature Review

- Past research has suggested that peer-mentoring could be an effective strategy to address transition issues with international students.
- In a study of peer mentoring in the Victorian University of Technology, third year students mentored first year students in Advanced English for Speakers of Other Languages. Benefits for the first year students included a better understanding of university life and improved English skills, with mentors also able to identify the experience as rewarding and improving their understanding of English language issues. (Cafarella, 1999)
- Peer mentoring has also been used successfully in assisting international students to adjust to academic, cross-cultural and adaptation challenges at a regional university. (Daley, 2004)
- The University of Canberra used pairs of mentors, one Australian, one international student to mentor small groups of international students, with both parties indicating improvements in confidence regarding inter-cultural communication (Devereux, 2004).

## Brief Literature review cont'd

- One of the more methodologically rigorous quantitative studies of peer mentoring in Business freshmen students is that described by Sanches, Bauer, & Paronto (2006). Utilising a four year longitudinal design 128 potential mentees were randomly assigned to either a mentoring or control group, with data gathered four times across first year; at entry, and four years later at graduation. Mentors were senior Business students who attended a training session, and were required to attend weekly orientation classes for freshmen with their mentees, as well as commit to meet at least three times outside the classes. Significant and persisting benefits were found with satisfaction with the university and commitment to the course being studied, with some partial effects related to the quality of peer mentoring.
- A challenge of paramount importance involves motivating and skilling one student body to actually work in diverse teams comfortably, in a trusting, non-threatening environment. It has been observed that home (local, domestic) students tend to stick to ready-made friendship groups usually of locals because of lack of time to make new friendships (Osmond and Reed, 2010:122).

## Brief Literature Review cont'd

- (Osmond and Reed, 2010:122). argued that international students had a more outward orientation compared with that of locals. They valued as part of their educational experience, the potential of exposure to different cultural groups even though they lacked experience, and were unfamiliar with group work.
- A stronger argument concerning the practices of home students was that they lacked the courage, motivation and skills to successfully communicate across cultures even though not blind to the associated benefits (Harrison & Peacock, 2010:137).
- According to Dunne (2009:12) students generally feel more comfortable forming friendships and interacting with others of similar backgrounds. Osmond and Reed (2010:121) labelled the fear of causing offence to international students expressed by local students as “passive xenophobia”. Harrison and Peacock (2010:139) called it “cultural scapegoating” and perceived it to be a fear of dissonance, discomfort and difference. Simple proximity does not predict rewarding cross-cultural outcomes. (Harrison & Peacock, 2010:139)
- While international students indicate they would like to interact socially with locals they do not readily move outside their comfort zone (Thom, 2010:164).

## Brief Literature Review cont'd

- According to Arkoudis et al (2010:12) it is important to point out to students the purpose and benefits of peer interaction across cultures, to initiate interactive learning activities to actively encourage students to move out of their regular social groups and to support students in their development of confidence in interacting with other peers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
- One way of promoting this interaction is through the conscious and planned use of mentoring relationships between peers of different cultural backgrounds. Smith (2008:50) suggests that peer mentoring roles include a combination of in-class and extra curricula activities in a host course.
- Further, a feature of the most effective programs for peer mentoring is integration into academic courses (Smith, 2008:53) and another is training of the peer mentors (2008:52).
- Stewart and Knowles (2003:149) argue that the mentoring process needs to be designed to meet the particular context of particular programs. They believe that the mentoring process should be a continuous and ongoing process of psychosocial support.

## Brief Literature Review cont'd

- Traditionally, mentoring was viewed as the act of providing wise and friendly counsel (Redmond 1990:188) and contains **cognitive** (often discipline-based knowledge, skills, behaviours and attitudes) and **affective** (social, trust, emotional) components.
- Rhodes (2008:62) mentoring can contribute to increasing **students' self-efficacy** and assist in their setting and accomplishing of goals. It can heighten feelings of inclusiveness (Merriam, 1983) and reduce stereotypes by revealing students who are intelligent, resourceful, resilient and willing to engage (Redmond, 1990:191).
- Mentoring is not a cure-all but it can be seen as an attempt by the academy to meet the needs of culturally diverse students, engage them and reduce the likelihood of leaving prior to graduation (Redmond, 1990:192).
- One of the biggest **obstacles** to successful mentor-mentee relationships is decrease in enthusiasm (Gritsch & Paterson, 2006). Other problems include lack of time and insufficient mentors. **Challenges** include different levels of English language proficiency, limited time spent on campus and lack of a 'common ground' between domestic and international students due to difference in academic priorities and learning experiences (Arkoudis, 2010:1).
- For Redmond (1990:193) the most effective mentoring requires that people listen to each other, care about each other, engage in cooperatively and mutually satisfying ventures, and manipulate systems to meet individual and group needs.

## Brief Literature Review cont'd

- A recent study of an International Student Mentoring Program 2010 at a large, multi-campus university in Australia (Oswald, 2011) was based on generic academic skills and support. Mentoring groups were organised according to ability, with 2-4 mentees per mentor. Thirty-five mentees completed the program. One of the program's objectives was to design a program tailored to the needs of first year international students, to improve their university experience. Of significance for both mentors and mentees was that the program helped make new friends, This was an important social outcome. For mentees the mentoring program helped them: understand the requirements of University assessment; make better use of University resources; feel more confident in academic skills and increase their sense of belonging to the University.
- The development of readiness of diverse groups of students to work together productively and equitably, and of professional development of teaching faculty to adjust or adopt teaching and learning approaches to classes of student of diverse backgrounds is central to the operationalizing of internationalisation strategies. One of the central issues has been increasing the interaction between domestic and international students (Marginson, 2007; Prescott & Hellstein, 2005).

## Brief Literature Review cont'd

- Dunne (2009) argues that students generally feel more comfortable forming friendships and interaction with others from similar backgrounds. This is equally true of international and local students. (Arkoudis et al, 2010).
- The report, *Finding Common Ground: enhancing interaction between domestic and international students* (Arkoudis, et al 2010) provides a balanced view of the benefits, challenges and obstacles in programs fostering interaction among local and international students.
- (Academic) benefits include improved academic achievement, preparation for the workplace and career guidance, feelings of belonging, role modelling, socio-psychological and emotional outcomes, social spin-off in the form of new friendships, and increased awareness and understanding of different perspectives.
- **Obstacles** from a teacher perspective include lack of time, large classes and 'heavy' curriculum content. Limited time spent on campus because of competing commitments, lack of a 'common ground' between local and international students because of different academic priorities are among the **challenges**.

## Brief Literature review cont'd

- While the focus of most mentoring programs is on academic issues, many international students join the group for social reasons (Lahman, Hsin-Te, Cheng, 2008). They want to make social connections and participate in social events.
- Arkoudis et al, 2010 point to the significance of feedback from students suggesting that they expect and value opportunities to have meaningful, structured learning interactions with peers of different backgrounds.
- Pilot work prior to the present study indicated that while this is a desire of international students they often have difficulty finding local students to interact with.
- Cunningham and Barbee (2000) indicate that emotional support provided by mentoring relationships makes people feel better as well as psychologically and emotionally healthier. They suggest that the social connections made through mentoring may be sustained into their future academic networks.

## The study reported here

- The project discussed in this paper was to explore the outcomes of an attempt to have trained local student mentors interact with international student mentees. Given the large proportion of international students in the course in which the research was embedded, the ideal was not achieved and some of the mentors were international students.
- This study was based on an assumption that having a diverse body of students is a wonderful resource which needs to be developed and used by students and faculty skilled in intercultural communication and having cross-cultural sensitivities.
- This project focussed on a course which included training and coaching elements in a business environment. Role playing and simulations figured significantly and assessment include practical work and reflective essays. The course was taught on two campuses.

## Research questions

**Effects for mentees:** Does a mentoring program like LAMP:

- Increase opportunities to relate to others from different ethnic backgrounds?
- Improve English oral communication skills?
- Assist the transition to university by providing a practical orientation to the new campus and resources available on that campus?
- Enhance academic self-efficacy?
- Provide a beneficial experience?

## Research Questions

**Effects for mentors:** Does being a mentor in a program like LAMP:

- Increase cross-cultural socialisation?
- Enhance academic self-efficacy?
- Provide a beneficial learning experience?
- **Efficacy of embedded mentoring:**
- What are the benefits and complications where cross-cultural peer mentoring is embedded for mentors within a course?
- Is there sufficient evidence to warrant extending peer mentoring elsewhere within the university?

# Research Design

	Mentees	Mentees	Mentors	Mentors	Cohort
Qualitative items	T1(1)	T2 (3)	T1 (3)	T2 (5)	T1 (1)
Cultural Knowledge		T2		T2	

## Methodology

- Qualitative data was collected in open-ended items administered to mentors and mentees either at Time 1 (pre meeting) or Time 2 (post meeting) or both.
- Responses were eyeballed and then coded using open, axial and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) In this coding process data from the responses was reduced and then regrouped to facilitate the inductive development of categories and themes.
- The method of constant comparisons was used. This was a test of consistency of responses. Comparisons were also made between and among responses to test against the emerging patterns, to establish differences and similarities among respondents.
- Whenever possible outliers (Miles and Huberman, 1994) in the data were used to test the robustness of the emerging themes and theoretical propositions.

## Open ended survey questions

**At T1 mentors were asked the following open-ended questions:**

*Why should you be a mentor?*

*List three things you think you can contribute as a mentor*

*What do you think you could gain from being a mentor*

**Mentees at T1** were asked to list three things they would like to gain from being mentored.

**At T2 mentors were asked five questions mainly about their relationship with the mentee. The questions were as follows:**

- *If your mentee did not see you for all the three planned sessions. Please give a reason.*
- *List three ways you think you were able to contribute to the mentoring relationship.*
- *What do you wish you had been able to give to the mentoring relationship that you did not?*
- *What have you been able to gain from your experience as mentor?*
- *Any other comments regarding peer mentoring?*

## Open ended survey questions

- **At T1 mentees** were asked to *list three (3) things they would like to gain from being mentored.*
- **At T2 mentees** were asked:  
*What aspects of Australian culture have you become more aware of as a result of your mentoring experience?*
- A final question asked of mentees and **mentors at T2** was:  
*“What aspects of other cultures have you become aware of as a result of your mentoring experiences?”*
- **At T2 both mentors and mentees** were asked:  
*“If you dropped out of the mentoring program at any stage please tell us why.”*

## Results briefly

	Mentors	Mentees	Mentors	Mentees	Mentors & Mentees
Questions	T1	T1	T2	T2	T2
1. Why should you be a mentor?	1. enjoy helping others; opportunity to learn; meet other people				
2. List 3 things you can contribute as a mentor	2. L/ship; enabler/facilitator; teacher; learner; sociability				

## Results briefly

<p>3. What do you think you can gain from being a mentor?</p>	<p>3.knowledge acquisition; academic skills; social and interpersonal skills</p>				
<p>n. List 3 things you would like to gain from being mentored</p>		<p>Academic skills, success; acquisition of new ideas/knowledge; developing good relationships; social skills</p>			

## Results briefly

<p>a. Reason for not seeing mentee for 3 sessions.</p> <p>b. 3 ways you contributed to mentoring r/ship</p> <p>c. What would like to have given but didn't?</p>			<p>a. Lack of interest; difficult meeting times; busy schedule</p> <p>b. knowledge of university life; guidance and support; friendship and social experience</p> <p>c. nil</p>		
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# Results briefly

d. What gained from experience as mentor?			d.relating to other culture and listening empathetically; openness and interest in the process; communication skills; goal setting and problem solving; confidence		
e. Other comments			e. nil		
2. List3 things you would like to gain from being mentored		x			

## Results briefly

<p>x. 3 ways you benefitted from mentoring r/ship</p> <p>y. Wished to gain but didn't</p> <p>z. Aspects of Australian culture became aware of</p>				<p>x. University culture and curriculum; enlarged friendship group; communication skills; knowledge of cultures</p> <p>y. mentors life experience; keeping in touch; more about assessment</p> <p>z. English language communication; colloquial language; cultural diversity of Australia; difficulty of making friends</p>	

## Results briefly

<p>m. Aspects of other culture more aware of?</p>					<p>Awareness of different ways of communicating; cultural differences</p>
<p>If you dropped out of the mentoring relationship at any time give reasons</p>					<p>Time scarcity; inconvenient locations; difficulty of getting mutually convenient times; mentee absence</p>

## Discussion and Conclusions

- The mentoring relationship was more than the transmission of knowledge and the development of academic skills. It was also a social experience.
- This focus on social interaction, socialising, building friendships, being available to assist and listen provides a level of interaction, trust and communication which results in psychosocial comfort that empowers a student (Redmond, 1990:189).
- This empowerment that comes with knowledge and confidence to grow academically and socially increases the likelihood of retention.
- Both mentors and mentees referred to the significance of learning to communicate with other people, especially across cultures. This is associated with assistance in adapting to a new culture.
- While mutual intercultural learning occurred for both mentors and mentees there was some hint of dissatisfaction for both parties. Classroom diversity can be a two-edged sword where home students become aware of the shortcomings of their intercultural skill sets and international students, while experiencing the need for more contact with host students, will not choose to go outside of their cultural groups (comfort zones). (Thom, 2010:164).

## Discussion and Conclusions

- Other obstacles and challenges including decrease in enthusiasm of some participants, lack of time, and too many mentees and insufficient mentors emerged in this LAMP study.
- For some mentors there were the issues of time scarcity and mentee absence. This is supported by the recent study of a mentoring program in an Australian University (Oswald, 2011) which found that the primary reasons for mentees leaving the program were: work/study commitments and time restraints.
- .Mentees had some concerns that mentors in some cases were too concerned about assessment in the course in which LAMP was embedded and less about the mentoring process and relationship. Other mentees referred to the lack of time mentors spent with them.
- These shortcomings and challenges were balanced by a number of very positive comments from mentees that the process had met their needs.
- It is clear that the selection and preparation of mentors is very important as is the handling of the link between mentoring and assessment requirements for the mentors.
- Both mentors and mentees became aware of communication issues particularly around cultural differences. Increased appreciation of the influence of cultural differences in leisure activities, values and beliefs, cultural norms, and family life emerged for both mentors and mentees.

## Discussion and Conclusions

- Such knowledge and increased understanding may contribute to a reduction in stereotyping (Redmond, 1990), the fear of causing offence (Osmond & Reed, 2010), improved English language skills (Arkoudis, 2010), foster connections with the campus community (Lahman, et al, 2008) and enhance good accomplishment (Rhodes, 2008).
- Aspects in Australian culture that mentees had become more aware of because of the mentoring relationship included issues like slang and accent. Further, they had become aware of the diversity of Australian culture and multiculturalism. Some mentees indicated they had learned little or nothing about Australian culture because the mentoring relationship had focussed on academic skills and University culture.
- The most common features learned about other cultures resulting from the mentoring relationship were food and cuisine as well as language.
- Greater emphasis in future mentoring programs could focus on an expanded and deeper exchange between mentor and mentees of cultural knowledge around customs, conventions, values and attitudes. Knowledge about leisure, language especially non-verbal communication and colloquialisms would be gains should this expansion occur.
- This would require an extension of the mentoring program and a greater emphasis on social interaction/relations and socio-cultural skills. Such a development would enhance the development of graduate attributes central to internationalisation of the curriculum where cultural diversity within the student body and amongst academic staff is used as a valuable and valued learning resource.

## Discussion and Conclusions

- There is no doubt that mentoring programs such as LAMP have beneficial outcomes and enormous potential. Therefore, it is efficacious to embed mentoring programs in existing courses but there are some qualifications which need to be considered.
- This study has demonstrated that there are also some limitations and challenges/weaknesses associated with such initiatives. **Challenges** include: finding suitable courses with willing convenors, for embedding mentoring programs; determining the most efficient and effective length of training of mentors and of the mentoring program; providing sufficient and clear explanations of the purposes of embedding coaching in mentoring in the course content and the assessment; linking the attitudes and skills developed to lifelong learning; finding sufficient and reliable mentors and mentees; establishing a balance among the elements of the mentor training, e.g., academic and assessment skills, social skills, university culture and support services, acculturation to the broader culture, multi-campus collaboration, social/friendship relations development and number of meetings between mentor and mentee.
- There is also a need for progress reports from mentors to the course convenors on meetings with mentee, to reduce the risk of breakdown in the mentor-mentee relationship. Future research needs to focus on these issues important to the success and persistence of mentoring programs which would further enhance the positive benefits for both mentors and mentees.

## Discussion and Conclusions

- The outcomes of this project were presented to those who funded it and presentations were made to members of a Teaching Community of Practice in the school where the course was embedded. Links need to be made with the CoP dedicated to mentoring. While there have been expressions of interest from colleagues there has been, to this point, no success in finding courses for embedding this mentoring process. This could be linked to low enthusiasm for developing a SoLT among academic staff, a perception of too much change and innovation without sufficient consolidation in courses, too much emphasis on content rather than process or some combination of the two, insufficient time and perceptions of overload.
- One major issue was the two campus offering of the course with consequent lack of control of data collection which was in the hands of non-members of the research team
- Another consideration emerging from the outcomes of this project and the success of an innovation within the University to link international and domestic students in service learning and social experiences is the potential for the development of a 'third space' or an informal curriculum. Perhaps this space provides opportunities for learning through social experiences like volunteering where domestic and international students bond informally resulting in incidental learning and the development of friendships as well as cross-cultural sensitivities with more effective learning outcomes than can emerge solely from the formal curriculum.

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