

## DE Mentor: The challenge of supporting distance learners

Phillipa Sturgess, Division of Teaching and Learning Services, Central Queensland University, [p.sturgess@cqu.edu.au](mailto:p.sturgess@cqu.edu.au)

Mark Kennedy, Division of Teaching and Learning Services, Central Queensland University, [m.f.kennedy@cqu.edu.au](mailto:m.f.kennedy@cqu.edu.au)

### Abstract

Peer mentoring programs have been used successfully in many institutions to improve the academic outcomes of first year and other at risk students. Central Queensland University (CQU) has extended this concept to address the challenge presented by its large cohort of distance education students. The DE Mentor program provides peer mentor support to distance education students enrolled with CQU. A crucial element in the success of such a program is the support given to the students who volunteer to act as mentors. While giving information and moral support to other students, the mentors also require information, advice and support in their new role. The mentors' geographical isolation from the university community introduces further challenges in providing appropriate support. This paper discusses strategies employed to enhance the support available to the mentors from the program coordinator and from other mentors. A range of communications options has been developed, including the use of a website incorporating chat rooms, discussion lists and participants' home pages. These encourage communications among mentors as well as with the coordinator. Information booklets have been developed for both mentors and mentees to help them understand the mentor's role, and to suggest strategies for maximising the mentor experience for all participants. Student evaluation of the program and of these developments is also discussed.

### Introduction

Participation in higher education in Australia is growing, and the ever more diverse student population is being offered a continually evolving range of technological options. In order to be competitive, universities must not only attract new students but also address the issue of student retention. While academic support and well-designed teaching are obviously important to the success of students, Tinto's (1975) model suggests that the social integration of students into the learning community is also critical to their success. Studies specifically looking at distance education students (e.g. Long, 1994; Peters, 1992) support this emphasis on the importance of social support for students.

This article has been peer-reviewed and accepted for publication in *Studies in LEID*, an international journal of scholarship and research that supports emerging scholars and the development of evidence-based practice in education. ISSN 1832-2050  
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McInnis, James, and McNaught's (1995) report highlighted the importance of students' experiences during their first year. They suggested that the development of a positive academic and social environment extending beyond the classroom could help address high attrition and failure rates amongst first year students. Many institutions have developed programs aimed specifically at supporting first year students. One widely used model is student mentoring. Single and Muller (2001) described the mentoring relationship as one "that is intended to develop and grow the skills, knowledge, confidence and cultural understanding of the protégé to help him or her succeed, while also assisting in the development of the mentor" (p. 108).

Student mentoring, or peer mentoring, programs make use of more experienced students to support new students at the commencement of their studies. Kennedy and McKavanagh (2003) describe such student mentors as "experienced travellers having spent some time on the journey of life and university study. They have absorbed the essence of the university, learnt the written and unwritten rules and survived—usually with enthusiasm and their own story of 'how to do it'" (p. 3). Carter and McNeill (1998) report that using experienced students as mentors for new students has several advantages for both groups of learners. For example, both groups have opportunities to expand their social networks within the institutional community. In addition, new students appreciate their mentor's experience and viewpoint as a fellow student, and feel more comfortable than they might feel with a staff member.

One group that is at particular risk of withdrawal from their studies is distance education students (Long, 1994). The geographical isolation that makes student–teacher and student–student interactions difficult to achieve also makes support programs more difficult to administer. Central Queensland University (CQU) has attempted to provide social support to distance education students with a program called "DE Mentor", which is based on the student mentor model.

## History

In 1997, the Counselling, Careers and Health unit of CQU established a student mentor scheme for students on its non-Rockhampton Central Queensland campuses (Connor & McKavanagh, 1997). This program links first year students with an undergraduate student who has completed at least one year of study and who has volunteered to assist with the program.

The student mentor may provide information and advice on issues such as resources available to students, study matters and other non-academic topics. This differs from tutoring in that the mentor does not offer specific advice or assistance with coursework and is not associated with a particular course. Mentors are first matched with new students (mentees) during orientation week, and then maintain contact throughout the first year of study.

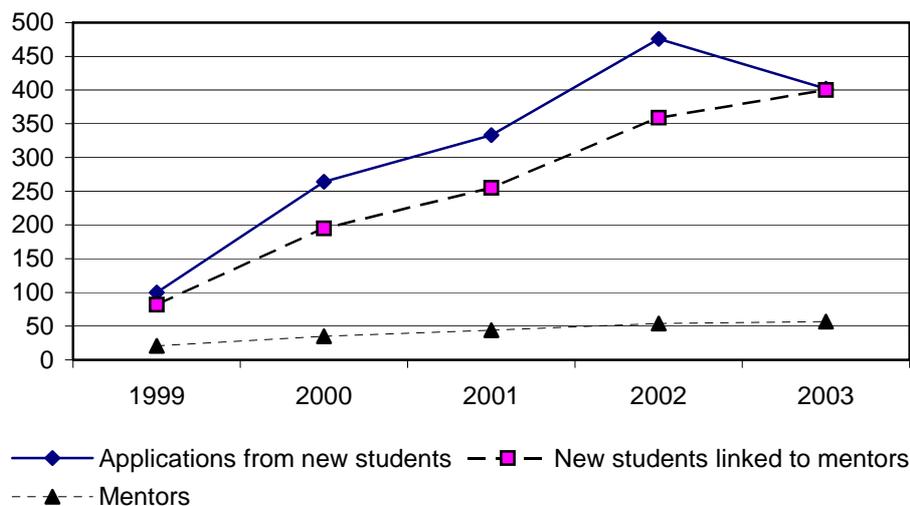
Because of the imbalance in numbers between first year students seeking mentors and volunteer mentors available, this program uses a one-to-many mentoring model, with each mentor being assigned up to ten mentees. This program has expanded and in 2003 linked 2000 first year students with 200 mentors on four campuses.

The success of this program led to the establishment of a similar program in 1999, targeting CQU's 6000 distance education students (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2002).

The distance education mentor scheme is based on the on-campus program, using a one-to-many mentoring model. Counselling, Careers and Health (whose name has since changed to Student Services) was instrumental in establishing this program and has continued to support it, although the program is now coordinated by the distance education Communications and Support Coordinator.

Participation in the program has grown steadily since its inception (see Figure 1). As shown, in the past not all new students seeking support could be linked with a suitable mentor. However, in 2003 all students seeking mentors were accommodated, with mentors having a manageable workload of an average of seven students each.

**Figure 1: Growth of the DE Mentor scheme since its inception**



The role of the distance education mentor is very similar to that of the on-campus mentor, with the exception of orientation week activities, which, because of the obvious practical difficulties of their attending, are not available to distance education students. Mentors are encouraged to make initial contact in the first week of term and to continue with regular contact, particularly at key times in the academic year. As face-to-face contact is not possible, mentors use a range of telecommunications technologies to maintain contact with their mentees and with the program coordinator. Email is the most commonly used method of communication, being relatively cheap for long distance communication and generally accessible by most students in the program. In some instances, telephone contact is the preferred option and a number of other online technologies have also been trialled, as is discussed below.

Because of the physical separation of the participants, the one-to-many nature of the mentoring relationship and the limited number of mentors, the process of matching mentees with suitable mentors is less concerned with personal characteristics than might be expected in a more traditional mentoring scheme. The primary concern is to try to match students in the same program of study, so that the experience of the mentor is relevant to the mentee's situation. The second consideration when matching is location, with students being matched to someone as geographically close as possible to reduce potential telephone costs. In some cases, for example with students in less popular courses of study, these criteria can't be met and the coordinator tries to make the best match possible for the new student.

The mentoring program is evaluated regularly, with email surveys being sent to participants each term. The coordinator also continually monitors the program in an informal way through regular contact with the participants. The feedback obtained from these sources has informed the ongoing development of this program.

The distributed nature of this program raises particular issues for its conduct. The necessity for telecommunications mediated contact rather than face-to-face interactions changes the nature of relationships. Some of the implications that this has for the participants in the program are discussed below.

## Discussion

Although the number of students volunteering to act as mentors has increased each year, it is still the limiting factor in the growth of the program. Attracting new students as mentees is quite straightforward, because information about the program is sent to all distance education students with their enrolment information. Attracting volunteers for the mentor role is more difficult. As Single and Muller (2001) suggest, successful recruitment depends on careful planning of when and how to recruit. In order to have mentors available at the beginning of the academic year, applications from potential mentors are first encouraged late in the previous year. Information is provided in a number of forums and over a period of time to maximise coverage of all potential mentors.

Four key recruitment strategies have been found to be successful:

- First, a webpage describing the mentoring program and giving details about applying to join is available on the student services website ([http://www.studentservices.cqu.edu.au/mentoring\\_intro.html](http://www.studentservices.cqu.edu.au/mentoring_intro.html)).
- Second, via the university's other recruitment strategies, interested students are referred to the site as it gives detailed information about the program and about the role and responsibilities of the mentors.
- Third, as the program coordinator also coordinates other support for distance education students, he is able to utilise a number of other channels of communication, such as the distance education newsletter that is sent to all distance education students and the distance education email list, to advertise the program.
- Fourth, existing mentors are encouraged to continue in the program for more than one year. As the great majority of distance education students study part time, they are generally eligible to continue with the program for several years.

This combination of recruitment strategies can be said to be successful because the evidence shows that the number of new mentors has increased consistently each year (see Figure 1).

In order to be effective, recruitment strategies must consider what factors motivate students to become mentors. Mentors are offered two tangible incentives to join the program: (i) material rewards; and (ii) career rewards. The material rewards include discounts on book purchases, while career rewards, which can be included in the mentors' *curriculum vitae*, may take the form of a certificate of participation from the university.

However, the reasons cited by applicants on their application forms suggest that the main motivators are more intangible. The four main reasons given for volunteering as a mentor are:

1. a desire to assist other students;
2. empathy with the problems faced by isolated students based on their own experience;
3. gratitude for assistance that they received from a mentor; and
4. a desire to prevent others from making the same mistakes that they made.

Consequently, information about the program is designed to emphasise the interpersonal nature of mentoring and the rewards of helping other students. Single and Muller (2001) suggest that an important part of the recruitment process is to manage the expectations of the participants. Unfortunately, this emphasis on the rewards of helping other students can create a problem if the experience of mentoring does not meet expectations.

Although responses to the program by both mentors and mentees are generally positive, where there is dissatisfaction the main problem reported by both mentors and mentees is insufficient contact. Respondents who reported that they had not been contacted tended to give more negative responses to all parts of the survey. This is to be expected from mentees who feel that they have not been given sufficient attention and have been failed by the program. However, mentors whose mentees had not responded to attempts at contact also reported a very high level of disillusionment. The level of dissatisfaction was particularly high if the mentor had commenced with high expectations of her or his capacity to help someone. This is indicated in some of the comments made by mentors when surveyed:

No contact by students...[I]felt like I didn't have any help to offer[.]

The 10% textbook was a real bonus. But the best bonus would be if the mentees would respond more.

Initially I was all pumped to go but have ended with a high level of dissatisfaction at the lack of feedback from the mentees.

(Student mentors, email communications, October 2003)

The program coordinator has tried to address this problem by stressing to both mentees and mentors the importance of maintaining contact. Attempts are made during the year to determine if any mentor pairs have not established contact and, where possible, new matches are made to overcome identified problems. However, in some cases dissatisfied participants do not report these difficulties until very late in the year.

In addition to indicating the frequency and timing of recommended contacts, the information provided to the mentors includes the roles of both mentors and mentees and the aims of the program, the type of support that can be reasonably provided by the mentor and the boundaries to that support, avenues of support that are available to the mentor, other services that are available through the university and tips for dealing with problems that may arise.

This information is primarily presented in the Mentor's Handbook (Kennedy & McKavanagh, 2003) and in telephone conferences between groups of mentors and the program coordinator at the beginning of the program each year. However,

Single and Muller (2001) suggest that providing training in the early stages of an e-mentoring program is not sufficient to support effective mentoring. They recommend ongoing support in three forms: training, coaching and community building. Each of these forms of support is discussed below.

The activities described above would be defined as training. Training could be said to commence with the initial recruitment activities, which begin to describe the role and expectations of mentors and the mentoring relationship. Although some face-to-face training would be beneficial for all concerned, the geographical isolation of the participants means that this is not feasible. Teletutorials (by telephone conference) are conducted early in the program each year by the program coordinator. In addition to providing information about the role of the mentor, these teletutorials provide opportunities for some personal contact with the program coordinator and other mentors. Many programs provide only training to mentors, but feedback from the participants in the DE Mentor program indicates the benefits of providing information to mentees as well. A handbook, similar to that provided to mentors, has also been developed for the mentees.

Coaching, as described by Single and Muller (2001), differs from training in that it is ongoing throughout the mentoring period. The aim of coaching is to provide assistance with mentoring situations as they arise and to keep the participants motivated. The DE Mentor coordinator uses a variety of communications techniques to assist with this. Most of these are many-to-many communications such as email lists, although personal telephone calls or letters are used when appropriate.

The main communication tool is the mentors' email list. All mentors are required to have email access and to be subscribed to the list, as the mailing list is the primary means of disseminating information from the coordinator. Messages are sent by the coordinator to this list at least fortnightly and, in addition to information about the university, these messages may include issues about mentoring or may simply be social chat. Although this list is also available for mentors to communicate with one another, its real worth lies in the availability of the program coordinator as a coach. As one mentor commented:

Add to this [the handbook] the knowledge that [the program coordinator] is there to assist or bounce off, if required, and I think Mentors have everything they need.

(Student mentor, email communications, October 2003)

Maintaining the email list can also be seen as part of the community building activities. The aim of community building is to create a sense of community beyond the boundaries of the program. This addresses the issues discussed at the beginning of this paper of encouraging student integration with the learning institution, and also extends these benefits to the mentors. In the best situations, this occurs naturally as a part of the mentoring relationship, with participants sometimes reporting an ongoing friendship after the formal mentor period is over. The program also tries to encourage a sense of community amongst mentors. To this end, a website, using initially the online learning management system WebCT and being migrated subsequently to CQU's newly adopted system Blackboard, was developed for use by mentors in 2003. This includes a bulletin board, real time online chat rooms and provision for individual homepages, as discussed in detail in a previous paper (Sturges & Kennedy, 2003).

Participation in the online activities offered was not compulsory and not all mentors chose to use it (78% of mentors accessed the site and 50% of these participated in at least one chat session). However, those who did access the site responded favourably:

Yes—it's an important lifeline[.]

I found the discussion board to be most useful as it helps to know that there are other people out there that are going through the same things and that you can ask other mentors about situations that you are not sure how to deal with.

(Student mentors, email communications, October 2003)

Initially the website was available only to mentors but, in response to feedback from those mentors who used it, it is being made available to mentors to communicate with their mentees, either individually or in groups.

## Conclusion

As Single and Muller (2001) warn, it is very tempting to set up a mentoring program and then ignore it, particularly a distance education program such as this, because it can easily be 'out of sight, out of mind'. Ongoing support for the program in the form of coaching and community building requires commitment from the program coordinator. We believe that the success of the DE Mentor program, as indicated by the favourable comments by the participants, is due to a process that we call a 'chain of support'—the new student is supported by the mentor, the mentor is supported by the program coordinator and other mentors and the program coordinator is supported by other university agencies, particularly Student Services. This model has benefits for everyone in the chain, as it provides emotional and practical support with the added bonus of building social networks, which in turn, we anticipate, will contribute to improved outcomes for students.

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