Jane Andrews, Robin Clark

Engineering Education Research Group, Aston University.

To be presented at: 2011 SRHE Annual Conference.

December 2011. Newport.

Dr Jane Andrews is a Senior Research Fellow currently employed in the School of Engineering & Applied Science, Aston University. Her research interests include Engineering Education, Pedagogic Practice and Theory, and University Management.

Dr Robin Clark is a Senior Lecturer and Programme Director in the School of Engineering & Applied Science, Aston University. His research interests include Engineering Education, Learning and Teaching Practice and STEM education.

Research Stream: Student Experience

Tackling Transition: Peer mentoring as a route to student success: The Findings of a Multi-Case Study Research Project

Abstract

Starting with the research question, 'how can student success be promoted through the use of Peer Mentoring', this paper critically discusses the findings of a large multi-case study research project which analysed the value of peer mentoring in combating first year attrition in seven different Higher Education Institutions. Following a mixed methodological design, the research critically analysed the benefits and outcomes of participation in Peer Mentoring. From a theoretical perspective, the paper contributes to debates about student mentoring and volunteering by showing that, for student peer mentors and mentees alike, participation in such programmes can have positive outcomes from both social and pedagogic perspectives. The paper concludes by arguing that peer mentoring has a key role to play in Higher Education, both in supporting new students but also in providing second and final year students with valuable transferable 'employability' skills and competencies.

Introduction: Peer Mentoring in Higher Education

Since the mid 1990's the massification of Higher Education in the UK has resulted in increased class sizes and a more diverse student population (Kreber, 2006). It is within this setting that the need to promote the early first year experience (Watson et al, 2004) has become increasingly important as Universities increasingly seek to market themselves to potential students. Over recent years, one response to such drivers has been to engage students in supporting each other. Evidence has shown that activities such as peer mentoring, when formally organised, enhance the student experience and in doing so begin to address the various individual and organisational issues associated with an increase in student population.

Peer Mentoring at university level generally involves more experienced students, usually in their second or final year, offering pastoral and academic support on a formally organised voluntary basis to their first year counterparts. Across the literature researchers agree that the concept of mentoring results in positive outcomes for both mentors and mentees alike (Enhrich et al, 2004; Joyce et al, 1997; Kram, 1983). With regards to mentoring activities within Higher Education, literature in this area tends to focus on the determinants and

outcomes of what is, in effect, students helping students by means of reciprocal peer learning and support (Anderson & Boud, 1996; Topping, 1996; 2005).

The literature suggests that for both student peer mentors and mentees, participation in mentoring affords a wide range of social, individual and academic benefits (Anderson & Boud, 1996; Cropper, 2000; Capstick & Fleming, 2002). Additionally, challenges represent institutional and individual barriers which reflect the complexity of mentoring relationships within an educational setting (Topping, 1996; Fayowski & MacMillan, 2008). In setting out to analyse the nature of such benefits and challenges in tackling student transition, this study makes an important contribution to current knowledge in this area.

The Peer Mentoring Study: Methodology

The primary aim of the study was to clearly identify and critically analyse the key determinants of peer mentoring within Higher Education from both the perspective of student volunteer peer mentors and the mentees. In order to achieve this a multi-case study approach was adopted involving an analysis of the mentoring activities in 7 different institutions.

A survey tool was developed aimed at capturing the value of mentoring from the perspectives of both Peer Mentors and Mentees. Both groups were surveyed simultaneously and asked similar questions. This approach allowed the researchers the opportunity to draw a comparison of the value of mentoring from the perspective of the two groups. The survey was administered across all seven institutions concurrently, resulting in a total of 329 completed questionnaires – a response rate of just under 10%.

The second stage of the research involved focus group interviews with a total of 84 Peer Mentors and Mentees. Following a grounded theory approach, the findings were analysed utilising simple and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Findings

The survey findings revealed that whilst the majority of respondents were anxious about adjusting to university life and making friends, most were confident about their communication skills and were committed to completing their studies, feeling sure that they

had the ability to develop their subject knowledge. The data revealed that the student mentors felt slightly more prepared and confident about university life than did the mentees with whom they were placed; although this may be reflective of the fact that the mentors were in their second or final year of study when surveyed, and their perceptions of how they felt before starting university may have changed over time.

The second part of the questionnaire focused on the social impact of participation in mentoring. The data revealed that peer mentoring provides a useful means by which both student volunteer mentors and their mentees are able to make the most of their university experiences. The third significant survey finding relates to pedagogy and suggests that peer mentoring has significant educational value for both student mentors and mentees.

A comparative analyse of the qualitative data identified four key concepts: relationships; reciprocity; responsibility; and recognition. Each of these concepts represents an important component of the student experience with 'belonging' and 'support' being key to each.

Discussion & Conclusion

Bringing the quantitative and qualitative findings together, this study has shown that the key value of Peer Mentoring in Higher Education is that it promotes a sense of belonging and in doing so provides 'a safety net' which adds value to and enhances the student experience. The study provides evidence that peer mentoring represents the means by which Higher Education Institutions can ease students' transition into Higher Education. From a statistical perspective, the research has shown that the benefits of participation in mentoring are greater for the student mentors than they are for mentees. In a university setting, the fact that participation in mentoring has more positive outcomes for student volunteer mentors than the mentees with whom they are placed represents a significant finding. This is particularly the case when considering the expectation that students be equipped with transferable 'employability' competencies. The results suggest that becoming a mentor provides an ideal opportunity for students to gain such competencies.

For the student mentees, the benefits of participating in the peer mentoring programme rest primarily on transition into Higher Education and enhanced learning experiences. This finding supports earlier research pertaining to the importance of networking and student support (Morosanu et. al, 2010; Watson et. al, 2004). The findings of this study are

distinctive in that they suggest that peer mentoring is in itself of significant pedagogic value for mentees – despite the fact that the programmes analysed as part of the study were largely social or pastoral in nature.

In conclusion, this study has shown that peer mentoring has a key role to play in Higher Education, both in supporting new students but also in providing second and final year students with valuable transferable 'employability' skills and competencies. However, perhaps the most valuable finding is that in assisting new students through the vital 'transition' phase of university peer mentoring represents a valuable pedagogic tool which institutions could use to their full advantage to simultaneously address issues of attrition and enhance the student experience.

Acknowledgement

References

Anderson, G., & Boud, D. (1996). Extending the role of peer learning in university courses, *Research and Development in Higher Education,* 19. pp 15-19.

Capstick, S., & Fleming, H., (2002). Peer Assisted Learning in an Undergraduate Hospitality Course: Second Year Students Supporting First Year Students in Group Learning, *Journal of Hospitality, Sport and Tourism Education,* 1. 1. pp 69-75.

Cropper, C., (2000). Mentoring as an Inclusive Device for the Excluded: Black Students' Experiences of a Mentoring Scheme', *Social Work Education,* 19. 6. pp. 697-607.

Enhrich, L.C., Hansford, B., & Tennent, L., (2004). Formal Mentoring Programs in Education and Other Professions: A Review of the Literature, *Educational Administration Quarterly,* 40. 4. pp. 518-540.

Fayowski, V., & MacMillan, P.D., (2008).'An Evaluation of the Supplemental Instruction programme in a first year calculus course, *International Journal of Mathematical Education in Science Technology,* 39. 7. pp. 843-855.

Joyce, E.A., Russell, D., & Adams, M., (1997). 'The Changing Nature of Mentoring in Organizations: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Mentoring in Organizations', *Journal of Vocational Behavior,* 51. pp. 1–14.

Kram, K.E., (1983). Phases of the mentor relationship, *Academy of Management Journal,* 26. 4. pp. 608–625.

Kreber, C., (2006). Introduction: The Possibility in Interpreting and Promoting Research Based Teaching. In Kreber, C. (ed), *Exploring Research-Based Teaching: Edited Volume: New Directions for Teaching and Learning,* San Francisco: Jossey Bass. 107. pp. 7-12

Morosanu, L., Handley, K., & O'Donovan, B., (2010). Seeking support: researching first-year students' experiences of coping with academic life**.** *Higher Education Research & Development.* 29. 6. pp. 665-678.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J., 1998. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory.* London: Sage.

Topping, K.J., (1996). The Effectiveness of Peer Tutoring in Further and Higher Education: A Typology and Review of the Literature, *Higher Education,* 32. pp, 321-345.

Topping, K.J., (2005). Trends in Peer Learning, *Educational Psychology,* 25. 6. pp. 631–645.

Watson, G., Johnson, G.C., & Austin, H., (2004). Exploring Relatedness to Field of Study as an Indicator of Student Retention. *Higher Education Research & Development.* 23. 1. pp. 57-72