Distance Mentoring for Tertiary Students:
An action learning approach

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Abstract
The paper attempts to provide a practical approach to developing an off-campus peer-support program within a tertiary education environment by critiquing a pilot mentor program conducted at the Central Queensland University in 1997. The paper explores the rationale for the Program, the action learning processes undertaken and evaluations received. Recommendations to redress some of the difficulties associated with implementing such a program are discussed.

Preamble
This paper describes the evolution of a Peer Support Program for off-campus students at the Central Queensland University. The Central Queensland University is an integrated regional university located in Central Queensland, Australia. Its main campus is in Rockhampton, with other campuses at Bundaberg, Emerald, Gladstone and Mackay. The remaining Australian campuses are in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne and cater primarily for international students.

The main aim of this paper is provide the reader with a "process orientated" overview of how this Program developed. The theoretical basis underpinning the rationale to run such a program will also be explored in the context of an educational environment. It is hoped that readers can use this paper in a practical way to assist them in implementing similar peer support initiatives in the tertiary education sector. An issue the authors often faced in the developmental stages of the Program was the proliferation of theoretical based literature and absence of practical based information.

This paper will initially describe the evolutionary process from a successful on-campus Mentoring Program to one offered at a distance. It will then explore the rationale for this type of program, the actual processes that were adopted, and the evaluations received from participants in the Program. Conclusions and recommendations to redress some of the difficulties associated with implementing an off-campus program are discussed.

Development of the mentoring concept
During 1996 a student mentor program was trialed at Central Queensland University for on-campus Faculty of Business and Department of Maths & Computing first year students. Mentors, who were primarily final year students selected through formal application and interview processes, were linked with six to eight first year students within their own Faculty/Department for the academic year. The role of the Mentor in this Program was one of peer-support, providing assistance and advice to first-year (Mentee) students within the broad parameters of university rules and procedures and access to university services. On a more informal level, Mentors were seen as the first point of call if difficulties occurred, providing basic problem solving and referral services to their Mentees. Mentors were supported with a training program, informal get-togethers, e-mail linking and newsletters. At the conclusion of academic year the Vice-Chancellor presented a certificate of participation to each Mentor.

A clear purpose was established for the Program and minimal funding obtained. The Counselling, Careers and Health Section of Central Queensland University facilitated the on-campus Program with support from a management committee representing Faculty, Departmental and Divisional staff and Mentor representatives.

positive feedback from Mentors, Mentees, Faculty and Divisional staff led to the Program obtaining funding to employ a coordinator to implement mentoring for all first year on-campus students at Rockhampton, Bundaberg, Mackay and Gladstone campuses for 1997. This currently involves some 210 Mentors and approximately 1400 first year students. The Student Association and Faculties also contributed funding for expenses such as training, t-shirts, and social gatherings. A Mentor Support...
Group in each Faculty was developed and a university-wide Advisory Committee gave support to the Program, with the coordination remaining with Counselling, Careers and Health.

**Rationale for present program**

The rationale for this particular style of peer support Program emanated from studies conducted by Counselling, Careers and Health (October, 1994) targeting 1000 Central Queensland University students and from research findings from other Australian and international tertiary institutions (eg. McInnis, James & McNaught, 1995; Tinto, 1995). The common issues, particularly in the first year of study, were high attrition rates, unacceptable failure rates and a low or ineffective use of the traditional support and information services provided by each tertiary institution. McInnis, et al. (1995) have further highlighted the need for Australian universities to focus on the "first year experience" based on a comprehensive research study conducted with a sample of Australian universities. The concept of the first year experience is not new, with growing international interest in the area promoting exciting advances and strategies in student learning and support. What McInnis, et.al. (1995) have provided are some excellent local research findings demonstrating our often narrow approach to the total learning environment. They believe that university teaching staff continue to struggle with the full implications of diversity in higher education, and that "students now require assistance beyond what was the norm" (McInnis, et.al., 1995; p. 10), recommending that a positive academic and social environment be developed that extends beyond the classroom.

Central Queensland University students constitute a higher than usual percentage of students from a background identified as needing particular preparation and support for tertiary education. Approximately 73% of Central Queensland University students come from a demographic area which is designated by the Commonwealth (DEET) as rural or isolated (Central Queensland University Equity Plan, 1996). The University also maintains a commitment to equitable entry requirements to most Central Queensland University courses. A Mentor Program using a small group structure was seen as a particularly effective way of assisting the support needs of a diverse student population.

The Central Queensland University Mentor Program sought to provide an environment which demystified the university process, provided staff and students with a valid reason to interact in an informal way, and facilitated information sharing in a timely and useful manner. As noted, mentoring is an established practice, however, in the last decade, there has been a substantial increase in published literature promoting the benefits of student mentoring or similar programs in educational institutions (eg. Cohen & Galbraith, 1995; Jacobi, 1991; Johnson & Sullivan, 1995; Moore & Amey, 1988; Ross-Thomas & Bryant, 1995; Rowe, 1989; Slicker & Palmer, 1993; Shulz, 1993; Tinto, 1995).

Shulz (1993) describes the primary benefits for both the Mentors and Mentees in terms of learning, growth and development. For Mentors, they have the opportunity to learn specific skills and new ideas, to grow personally and professionally from the mentoring relationship, and to value and confidently approach challenges faced in progressing through various developmental stages. Similarly for Mentees, Shulz (1993) explains that learning is enhanced through one-to-one contact and the provision of information to create effective strategies for learning, providing a sharing framework for creative and intellectual growth and, particularly towards termination of the mentoring relationship, confirmation of the Mentees own capabilities, autonomy and maturity.

The success of the On-Campus Mentor Program enthused the advisory committee to examine ways of addressing similar support needs for off-campus students. Central Queensland University off-campus students already have access to some 'other student' networking through voluntary study groups and involvement of experienced students in distance education programs. A student peer-support model was seen to only enhance these existing supports. The significant findings of a comprehensive research study of four Australian universities commissioned by the National Board of Employment, Education and Training found "compelling evidence that differences in academic performance between on-campus and off-campus students were greater for students in first year of enrolment than later years" (Long, 1994, p. 54). The study (Long, 1994, p. 55) further concludes
"One result however is clear. Where it is has been possible to separately identify withdrawal from units, off-campus students generally have higher rates of withdrawal than on-campus students." The Management Group believed that the formalised small group networks would go some way to addressing these demonstrated disadvantages for off-campus students. The resulting discussions led the Faculties and Student Association eager to extend the Mentor Program to off-campus students, affording these students the same level of access and benefits as the on-campus students.

**The process**

**Preliminary Discussions**

University based research funding was obtained to pilot a peer-support program targeting off-campus students for the 1997 academic year. Three target areas were selected in Cairns, Emerald and Gold Coast districts. Although Central Queensland University's off-campus student population is much more widespread nationally and internationally, the Off-Campus Management Committee acknowledged that there would be numerous hurdles involved in offering off-campus programs. Planning, training and supporting an On-Campus Mentor Program was conceivable, however duplicating this within a distance framework presented a number of significant challenges.

Expressions of interest to participate in the Program were sent to all faculties with the Faculty of Business, Faculty of Health Science and Department of Maths & Computing finally being selected for the pilot. Applications for Mentor Positions were then posted to all eligible off-campus students, and a suitable applicants selected. All first year off-campus students from all faculties were invited to participate as Mentees in the designated areas, as the Management Committee believed much of the support that these students required was generic across disciplines not course specific. One of the pivotal principles of the Program was that it would provide a more formalised peer support environment but not provide any level of academic or tutorial support, lessening the necessity to match Mentees and Mentors by Faculty.

The Management Committee shared similar beliefs regarding the success of the Off-Campus Program as had underpinned the On-Campus Program. One significant belief was that a Mentoring Program cannot be left to drift as a warm and fuzzy feeling engendered amongst some generous students, it needed clear planning, resources, committed staff, and a definite purpose. It was also important that the Program could provide some tangible benefits to the Mentors as well as the first year students.

An action learning/research model was used as a way of assessing if this project was in fact a viable one. Action learning/research in this approach involved the combination of understanding and action, producing new knowledge through the cooperative work of those participating. This approach to the project meant that the Management Committee were not setting in place something already developed and functional, but something which would support ongoing learning by those involved and further development of a program of mentoring in the University. Each component of the Program was planned to follow the spiral of observation, reflection, planning and further action (Kemmis, 1988; Zuber-Skerritt, 1993).

**The Nuts and Bolts**

**Applications:**

Letters of expressions of interest and application forms for Mentor positions were sent to students (from Faculty of Business, Department of Maths and Computing and Faculty of Health Science) who had successfully completed one academic year of study in distance mode prior to the academic year in which the Program was to run. Course advisers and academic staff assisted in recommending students as potential Mentors. Sixty students were invited to apply, 25 students replied, telephone interviews were held and 19 Mentors were selected. This number was based on projected numbers of first years in the target areas, and allocating six to eight students per Mentor (Group size was estimated on the basis of the on-campus experience and approximately a 30% non-participation rate.)
Needs Analysis:
Feedback from Mentor application forms and interviews provided confirmation of the support needs of students new to distance study. The most repeated statement being that having traversed the tertiary system as a new student, students believed they had much to offer other new students. The application form also assisted the Management Team in assessing Mentor's support and training needs and the goals of the Mentors for participating in the Program.

Training Program:
The Training Program was planned to cover content relating to the process of mentoring including effective communication skills, especially when the mode is e-mail or telephone, problem solving and conflict management. The training content was developed in module format in conjunction with the Central Queensland University's professional and continuing education staff and facilitated by counselling staff via teleconference. Four teleconferences were conducted during the year.

Mentor Resources:
Each Mentor was allocated up to one hundred dollars to assist with telephone or mailing costs associated with maintaining contact with their Mentees and program coordinators. Mentors were asked to keep a log of these costs that were submitted at the end of the Program. The average reimbursement claim was $27.00.

A resource kit was mailed to each Mentor ensuring that they had an up-to-date file of relevant university information and telephone/e-mail addresses of the Management Committee and other relevant university staff. An e-mail discussion board was established linking Mentors together. Mentors were encouraged to use this list and obtain assistance from other Mentors if required.

Linking Groups and Participation:
Mentees were enrolled and advised of their Mentor Group prior to or soon after Orientation. Lists were established as far as practical on geographical location. As participation in the peer support groups was of a voluntary nature, Mentees were asked to advise the University if they did not wish to participate in the Program. It was the Mentor's responsibility to initiate contact with their Mentees.

Evaluations and conclusions
First Year Students Evaluations
In early June 1997 questionnaires were mailed to all first year students participating in the Program (n = 86, response rate 24.5%). The significant outcomes have been summarised below:

* 40% of those that have participated in the Program have been previously off-campus students. This figure is somewhat higher than anticipated as the Program was originally designed to assist students with little skill in negotiating the off-campus mode of study. No screening processes were employed when the first year students were selected.

* 93% of the respondents were aware of the existence of the Peer Support Program, indicating that information available on the Program was read and understood.

* 80% of the respondents were contacted by their Mentor at least once. Given the difficulty of contacting students who often change their contact details, this figure represents an acceptable contact rate. The Management Committee increased this contact through frequent updates to the Mentors on changes to Mentee personal details. This was a time consuming task and it would not be feasible to continue this process if the Program was extended to the total off-campus student population. An improved tracking process for changes of contact details is required.

* 50% of respondents indicated that they actively participated in the Program. There are two possible reasons for this lower than expected figure. Firstly, almost half of the first year students have had previous off-campus experience in tertiary study. Secondly, where respondents were provided the opportunity to elaborate on reasons for not participating, many indicated that they felt
they did not require assistance but the understanding that the service was available if the needed it was reassuring.

* The results clearly indicated that Mentors made significantly more contacts to Mentees that did Mentees to Mentors. The Mentor/Mentee contact ratio was 3:1. It was envisaged that, in a program such as this, the Mentors would make the initial contact and their Mentees would then contact them on a "as needed" basis. Generally did not appear to be the case. Mentees reported that initial face-to-face contact with their Mentor would have made them more comfortable about contacting the Mentors more frequently. The possibility of having a group meeting at the beginning of the Program is seen as desirable but often prohibitive through geographical location.

* The main reasons for seeking support from Mentors included motivational problems, late delivery of distance materials, enrolment and administrative procedures and advice on communicating to the University.

* All but two of the respondents wished to remain involved in the Program for the duration of the academic year, with 90% indicating that the Program had been either satisfactory or very satisfactory. These responses are interesting if discussed in light of the 50% contact finding reported previously. It appears that success of the Program should not be assessed only on the degree of actual contact between Mentor and Mentee, but more importantly on the sense of belonging and ownership of the university and having support available if it is required.

* When asked what were the most positive things about the Program, Mentees frequently reported that it is important that they know someone is there to talk to, that they can talk to people outside normal working hours, the awareness that the university is attempting to include off-campus students in their programs and the development of friendships.

* Common suggestions for improving the Program included Mentors linked with Mentees studying the same course, meeting face-to-face early in the semester and posting relevant information rather than participating in long and often expensive telephone calls.

**Mentor Evaluations**

The Mentors were e-mailed and posted questionnaires in early June 1997 (n= 19, response rate 89.5%). The summary of the major finding from the Mentor questionnaire were:

* 75% of respondents felt the teleconference training sessions had been a valuable experience. Mentors indicated that the teleconference training programs had assisted in developing their communication and people skills. It was suggested by a number of respondents that the training should focus more on initial contact skills and the first training session should be held very early in the calendar year, perhaps before Orientation Week were their assistance to Mentees was seen as most crucial.

* The common expectations from Mentors of the Peer Support Program included 1) encouragement and assistance to new students, and 2) solving problems and supporting first year students. When asked if the Program met the expectations that they had recorded, half indicated that they were completely or mostly met. The other half indicated that their expectations were not really met or not met at all.

* The Mentors level of expectations are interesting if viewed in light of the responses from Mentees who were overwhelming were satisfied with the Program (ie. 90%). It appears that while many of the expectations of the Mentors have not been met, most of their Mentees have been quite satisfied with the Program. This may indicate that more work needs to be conducted in the early stages of the Program with the Mentors guiding their expectations of the Program based on previous experience, a luxury that was not available for the existing Program. The average number of contacts between Mentor and each Mentee was 2.5.

* When asked how many Mentees should be assigned to each Mentor, the average number was 7. This figure represents, from on-campus experience, a suitable but slightly higher than anticipated number of students for each Mentor, given not all Mentees actively participate in the Program.
Common suggestions for improvement included: closer geographical locations, more information from the coordinators regarding feedback received from Mentees, Mentees doing the same course and face-to-face meetings. These suggestions were consistent throughout much of the evaluative instruments for both Mentors and Mentees and provide a platform for refinement of the Program.

**Conclusion**

This paper has presented an overview of the development of an Off-Campus Peer Support Program. In terms of a concluding comment, it appears peer support programs such as this can provide, particularly for first year students, a number of significant benefits. It contributes to the promotion of a more inclusive and friendly university culture for all students, provides support to students in way they can access and understand and potentially reduces the anxiety often associated with making the transition to tertiary studies. It is hoped the outcomes will be more successful students, both personally and academically. The expectations for Mentors are that their own self-confidence and general life skills will be enhanced, the outcome of which are potentially more employable and personally successful graduates. Based on the feedback received from the University and the participants in the Program there are a number of areas than need to be refined if the Program is to be extended to the total off-campus population. What needs to be demonstrated is that the resources invested in such a program will in the long term have the economic benefits to the University as a whole. We believe this to be the case and acknowledge student support is moving away from the traditional reactive therapeutic model to more active preventative type programs that access a broader range of students.

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**References**


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